

NORDIC MYTH AND LEGEND  
IN THE MUSIC OF JÓN LEIFS

By

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To Andrea and Benjamin,  
with love.

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A large number of Nordic operas, vocal works, symphonies, and orchestral scores, as well as compositions for small ensembles and solo instruments, are directly related to various myths and legends found in such Nordic epics and sagas as the *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Kalevala*, *Heimskringla*, and *Gesta Danorum*, as well as several of the major Icelandic sagas. In fact, among Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), Carl Nielsen (1865-1933), and Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)—the three most significant composers in Nordic music history—over twenty notable compositions may be cited that are related to such literary material. Nevertheless, aside from just a handful of compositions by these important figures, the bulk of musical scores based on Nordic epics and sagas by Scandinavian, Finnish, and Icelandic art music composers are virtually unknown outside of their native countries. This is particularly true of such works by Iceland's premiere art music composer, Jón Leifs (1899-1968).

In order to better facilitate a discussion of Leifs, this dissertation opens with a brief synopsis of the six aforementioned literary sources of Nordic myths and legends, followed by a broad overview of the many Nordic art music compositions that have been inspired by, or use material from, these epics and sagas. Following this information, the bulk of this dissertation focuses on the unique musical language and compositional output of Jón Leifs, specifically as relates to his musical employment of Nordic myths and legends. Particular analytical attention is given to Leifs's monumental *Sinfónía I* "Söguhetjur," op. 26 (Symphony No. 1 "Saga Heroes"; 1942), better known as the *Sögusinfónían* (Saga Symphony), and the cantatas *Guðrúnarkviða*, op. 22 (The Lay of Guðrún; 1940), *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, op. 61 (The Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer; 1964), and *Grógaldur*, op. 62 (The Spell of Gróa; 1965).

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Literature has played an important role in the history of Western art music since the Middle Ages. The most obvious connection between the two arts is the use of pre-existing poetry or other established literary works as the text or libretto for vocal scores. Literally thousands of compositions—from Medieval motets to Renaissance madrigals to Romantic Lied to Modern choral works—may be cited as examples of this important relationship between literature and music. In addition, many poets and authors have written literary texts with the sole intention of having their works receive musical settings by composers. This is particularly true of the many opera librettos that have been written for composers from the early-Baroque Era to the present time.

Frequently less obvious is the relationship between literature and music concerning many purely instrumental compositions. While such programmatic works may often be listened to and enjoyed without knowledge of their literary connections, such information almost always enhances the experience, often serving to justify specific musical material within the works as well. For instance, the incessant eighth- and quarter-note viola figure in the second movement of “La primavera” from *Le quattro stagioni* (Spring from The Four Seasons; 1725), by Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741), makes little sense without knowledge of the poetic line “Dorme ’l caprar col fido can’a lato” (The goatherd sleeps, his faithful dog at his side) or the composer’s score indication //

*cane che grida* (The dog is barking). Likewise, the significance of the cello and viola solos found in *Don Quixote*, op. 35, by Richard Strauss (1864-1949), is lost without some knowledge of the seventeenth-century novel by Miguel D. Cervantes (1547-1616).

In addition to these relatively recent literary works, ancient literature has also played a rather significant role in the history of Western art music. Myths and legends, particularly those of the Greeks and Romans, have provided many composers, as well as librettists, with both inspiration and programmatic material for various exemplary works. Indeed, the first operatic masterpiece, *L'Orfeo* (1607) by Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), is based musically and textually on the popular Greek myth of Orpheus and Euridice. Twelve of the many symphonies by Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739-99) are based on Roman mythology from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, such as *Der Sturz Phaëtons* (The Fall of Phaëton; c. 1781) and *Die Versteinierung des Phineus und seiner Freunde* (The Turning to Stone of Phineus and His Friends; c. 1781). The Greek myth of Prometheus, meanwhile, is the subject of the 1850 tone poem of the same name by Franz Liszt (1811-86).

Although not used nearly as often by Continental European and North American composers as the Greco-Roman myths and legends, the many ancient literary works of Northern Europe—specifically those of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland—have had an important influence over the last several centuries on the art music history of their respective countries. Characters and events from Nordic myths and legends appear in a great number of Nordic operas, vocal works, symphonies, and orchestral scores, as well as compositions for small ensembles and solo instruments. In fact, among Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), Carl Nielsen (1865-1933), and Jean Sibelius

(1865-1957), the three most significant composers in Nordic music history, over twenty major compositions may be cited that are based on Nordic myths and legends.

Nevertheless, aside from just a handful of compositions by such major figures, the bulk of compositions based on Nordic myths and legends by Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, and Icelandic art music composers are generally unknown outside of their native countries, despite the fact that most are available on compact disc throughout Europe and North America. One of the two purposes of this dissertation, therefore, is to provide a broad overview—as found in Chapter 4, “Nordic Art Music Based on the Epics and Sagas”—of the many Nordic art music compositions that were inspired by, or use material from, the many myths and legends presented in the various Nordic epics and sagas. While nearly every art music genre will be considered to some degree in this chapter, the bulk of the space will be devoted to both vocal and non-vocal works scored for orchestra.

In order to better facilitate such a discussion, however, Chapter 4 is prefaced by a short chapter addressing the most significant epics and sagas in Nordic literary history. Ordered on a continuum from the most mythological to the most historical, the specific Nordic epics and sagas included in Chapter 3, “Myth, Legend, History: The Epics and Sagas”—which also happen to be the principal literary sources for the Nordic myths and legends that have most frequently inspired art music scores by Nordic composers—are the *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Kalevala*, Icelandic family sagas, *Heimskringla*, and *Gesta Danorum*.

Using Chapters 3 and 4 together as a point of departure, following Chapter 2, “Review of Literature,” the remaining chapters will focus on the second purpose of this

dissertation—to investigate the relatively unknown Icelandic composer Jón Leifs (1899-1968) and four of his compositions based on Nordic myth and legend. Chapter 5, “Jón Leifs in Nordic Music History,” contains a brief biography of the composer followed by a lengthier discussion of his compositional style and his musical output. Chapter 6, “*Sögusinfónían*,” is devoted to Leifs’s monumental five-movement *Sinfónía I* “*Söguhetjur*,” op. 26 (Symphony No. 1 “Saga Heroes”; 1942). Meanwhile, three of the composer’s works for voice and orchestra—the cantatas *Guðrúnarkviða*, op. 22 (The Lay of Guðrun; 1940), *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, op. 61 (The Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer; 1964), and *Grógaldur*, op. 62 (The Spell of Gróa; 1965)—are the subject of Chapter 7, “*Guðrúnarkviða*, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, and *Grógaldur*.”

### Need for Study

The worldwide reputation of Nordic music rests quite firmly on just three unconnected individuals—Edvard Grieg in Norway, Carl Nielsen in Denmark, and Jean Sibelius in Finland. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to realize that, just as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven are not the only talented composers that have lived and worked in Austria, Grieg, Sibelius, and Nielsen are, by far, not the only talented composers that have lived and worked in the Nordic nations. Unfortunately, most of the other talented composers and their works have remained virtually unknown outside of their native lands. In the meantime, however, the popularity and importance of Grieg, Sibelius, and Nielsen have continued to escalate. The works of these three individuals became so familiar over the course of the twentieth century that they are frequently recorded, appear regularly on concert programs, and are even used in movies and television shows.

Ironically, it is these three composers' differences, rather than their similarities, that have allowed them to maintain this musical oligarchy, as each specialized in specific musical genres. Regardless of these composers' successes or failures in any particular genre, however, their compositional outputs display the basic musical genres and forms used by most Nordic composers—genres and forms, which for the most part, have paralleled those of their European neighbors to the south. Further, all three of these figures, like so many of their Continental contemporaries, wrote compositions that are based on literary works. More specifically, each of them composed at least one musical work that is based on a Nordic epic or saga, whether programmatically or through the setting of text. While these works, especially those of Sibelius, are fairly well-known, the many such works by their fellow Nordic composers are virtually unknown. Sadly, this is particularly true of Iceland's premier composer, Jón Leifs, whose musical output includes numerous significant works based on ancient Nordic literature.

The need for this study, therefore, is obvious—to bring attention to the many nineteenth- and twentieth-century Nordic art music compositions, especially those of Leifs, that are based on Nordic epics and sagas. In order to do so, consideration must also be given to the specific Medieval literary works that had such a profound effect on so many Nordic art music composers of the past two hundred years. While information on the *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Kalevala*, Icelandic family sagas, *Heimskringla*, and *Gesta Danorum* is readily available, such has hitherto rarely been discussed in conjunction with the other arts. By the same token, though much has been written about the musical works of Grieg, Nielsen, and Sibelius, very few of these studies have focused on the relationship between their music and literature.

Scholarly information on the music of Jón Leifs, on the other hand, is far rarer, hence posing another need for this present study. Though publications do exist in Icelandic—such as Carl-Gunnar Åhlén’s extensive biography *Jón Leifs: Tónskáld í Mótbyr* (Jón Leifs: Composer in Adversity; 1999)—concerning this seminal Nordic composer, sources in English consist almost exclusively of a few random journal articles and compact disc liner notes. Further, due to the inaccessibility of many of Leifs’s scores—basically available only from the Íslensk Tónverkamiðstöð (Icelandic Music Information Centre)—no musicological analysis of any of his major works based on Nordic myths and/or legends has been undertaken by an American scholar, at least not to the author’s knowledge.

It is hoped that this dissertation, therefore, will not only bring to light a large number of Nordic art music compositions that have been based on Nordic myth and legend, but also will bring much deserved attention to a quintessential figure in the history of Nordic art music—the revered Icelandic composer Jón Leifs—as well as several of his finest works: *Sögusinfónían*, *Guðrúnarkviða*, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, and *Grógaldur*.

### A Few Technical Matters

Because of the unique nature of literature and language, a few explanations are required before proceeding to a review of the available literature on the Nordic epics and sagas and Nordic art music. To begin, in referring to the *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Kalevala*, Icelandic family sagas, *Heimskringla*, and *Gesta Danorum* as a body of literature, the phrase “Nordic epics and sagas” is often employed. While such terminology may not be completely accurate to a literary scholar, it is used here for the

sake of convenience in writing and uniformity and is not meant to imply any sort of critical or analytical connotation. Further, in referring to the content of these literary works, the phrase “Nordic myth and legend” frequently appears, despite the fact that several of the Nordic epics and sagas in question are also of great historical value.

Explanation should also be given to the use of certain geographical vocabulary in this study. Specifically, the terms “Nordic” and “Northern European” refer to the five collective nations of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. The term “Scandinavian,” on the other hand, technically denotes the linguistic group consisting of Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian and therefore will be used only in reference to these three countries. By the same token, the phrases “Nordic myth and legend,” “Nordic epics and sagas,” and “Nordic mythology” are meant to refer to the collective literature of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland as a whole. When the word “Nordic” is replaced with “Norse,” on the other hand, such as in “Norse mythology,” reference is usually only being made to the material that belongs to the shared cultural heritage of Norway and Iceland, though Denmark and Sweden also have some claim to such material. The phrase “Finnish mythology,” on the other hand, refers exclusively to that found in Finland’s national epic, the *Kalevala*.

Names of individuals, finally, require some clarification. Due to the complexities of the Icelandic language, translations of Icelandic literature—such as those found in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* from Leifur Eiríksson Publishing (1997)—tend towards being completely Anglicized. For example, the Icelandic name “Skarphéðinn” often appears as “Skarphedin” in translation. An even more elaborate example is the Icelandic name “Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld,” which translates as “Thormod Kolbrun’s Poet” in

English. Further, several of the Icelandic spellings used by Jón Leifs during the first half of the twentieth century are ever so slightly different today, usually consisting of the change, addition, or deletion of a single letter. For this reason, in general, modern Icelandic spellings have been used whenever possible in this dissertation, except, of course, in the quotation of translated material.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Much has been written in the English language over the past century about each of the epics and sagas included in this dissertation. The majority of such studies, however—particularly those in journals—tend to be more critically and analytically focused than is necessary or desirable for musicological purposes. Nevertheless, there exists a small body of texts that includes useful background information, both historical and analytical, on each of the respective pieces of literature. Much less has been written, on the other hand, concerning the majority of musical works discussed in this dissertation, though information on the composers themselves may be gleaned from a variety of sources. As for Jón Leifs, the main focus of this study, only a single thesis and a few English-language articles have been written that hold any useful information about the composer and his music.

### **Literature on the Epics and Sagas**

Nordic epics and sagas, particularly the Icelandic sagas, received a considerable amount of attention from scholars during the twentieth century. Among the more recent studies on this literature, a few are particularly notable for their inclusion of succinct background information, rather than specific analyses. Such is the case with three of the four volumes that comprise *A History of Scandinavian Literatures*, from the University of Nebraska Press, all of which provide general information on their respective country's

ancient literature. More detailed information on such literature, meanwhile, is available from the variety of texts dedicated to each individual epic and saga.

David W. Colbert, in his essay “The Middle Ages” from *A History of Danish Literature* (1992), discusses the role of Saxo Grammaticus and the *Gesta Danorum* in the development of Danish history and literature. Similarly, James E. Knirk, in his essay “Old Norwegian Literature” from *A History of Norwegian Literature* (1993), discusses Snorri Sturluson, the *Heimskringla*, the *Prose Edda*, and the *Poetic Edda*, while also addressing the structure and importance of both Eddic and skaldic poetry in ancient Norse literature. Meanwhile, Michael Branch’s essay “Finnish Oral Poetry, *Kalevala*, and *Kanteletar*,” from *A History of Finland’s Literature* (1998), is dedicated largely to the history, content, and poetic structure of the *Kalevala*, as well as Elias Lönnrot’s role in the epic’s creation.

In addition to these three volumes from the University of Nebraska Press’s *A History of Scandinavian Literatures*, general information on several of the Nordic epics and sagas may be found in Stefán Einarsson’s *A History of Icelandic Literature* (1957). Einarsson dedicates nearly half of this text to discussions of the various Icelandic Sagas, the *Heimskringla*, and both *Eddas*, as well as their respective authors, poetic structures, and literary styles. The study also includes a brief synopsis for each piece of literature discussed.

The contents of both the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda* are the subject of the *Handbook of Norse Mythology* (2001) by John Lindow. This practical text covers not only the background and history of both works, as well as Snorri’s contribution to Nordic literature, but also includes extensive entries on each of the persons, places, and things

found in Norse mythology. Cross-references to both the *Gesta Danorum* and *Heimskringla* are also included for a number of the more notable entries.

Extensive information on the history and content of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* may be found in Diana Whaley's *Heimskringla: An Introduction* (1991) and Sverre Bagge's *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (1991). The former text, as its title implies, is a general overview of the epic, while the latter focuses on the societal, moral, historical, and contextual aspects of the work. Meanwhile, two specific and important sagas in the *Heimskringla*—those of Saint Ólaf and Harald Sigurtharson—are the subject of the essay “The Saintly and the Secular: Brother Kings Olaf and Harald in *Heimskringla*” by Rebekah Thacker from the monograph *Nordic Experiences: Exploration of Scandinavian Cultures* (1997).

An extensive and thorough study of the *Kalevala* is undertaken by Juha Y. Pentikäinen in the text *Kalevala Mythology* (1989/99). This work contains chapters and sections on various aspects of the Finnish national epic, including its genesis, mythological significance, structure, nationalistic importance, and historical position. Pentikäinen's study also considers a number of the *Kalevala*'s internal thematic elements, such as courtship, shamanistic tradition, and the afterlife.

Of the many available texts concerned with the Icelandic sagas, two are particularly useful for this study. In the essay “The Icelandic Sagas,” from *Heroic Epic and Saga* (1978), author Theodore M. Andersson provides a succinct general overview of each of the various types of sagas—including the kings' sagas, family sagas, and legendary sagas—as well as their literary and cultural importance. Andersson provides a much more focused approach to just the family sagas in his two-part study *The Icelandic*

*Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (1967). The first part, “Theory,” is sub-divided into chapters on saga structure, rhetoric, and heroic legacy. The second part, “Analysis,” includes analytical information on twenty-four different sagas.

“Njál’s Saga,” the seminal Icelandic family saga and the most significant Icelandic saga included in this study, is the focus of the texts *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction* (1976) and *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece* (1971), by Lars Lönnroth and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson respectively. Though both works focus exclusively on this single saga, they differ somewhat from each other in their approach. For the most part, Lönnroth’s study is concerned with such historical and literary elements as the saga’s sources, structure, style, and social context. Sveinsson’s study, on the other hand, delves into such issues as plot and character development.

Though not a study on any specific epic or saga, the *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (1998) by Andy Orchard deserves mention as it contains close to 800 entries on various topics in Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic mythology, including those on the major epics and sagas, characters, places, items, and concepts. Also included are appendices on various types of Norse names, as well as an extensive bibliography. Similar in purpose is H. R. Ellis Davidson’s *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (1964), which contains far fewer entries overall, but more information on each of its included topics. Missing from both of these works, however, due to their exclusive focus on “Norse” mythology, is any information on the Finnish *Kalevala*.

Finally, a wealth of information is available in the supplemental material accompanying each of the primary epic and saga editions chosen for this project. Introductory material on each work’s origin and content, by Lee M. Hollander, may be

found in the University of Texas Press editions of both the *Heimskringla* (1964) and the *Poetic Edda* (1962), while a similar introduction by Anthony Faulkes is found in the Everyman/J. M. Dent edition of the *Prose Edda* (1995). More extensive, however—dealing not only with origin and content, but also history, context, and structure—are the introductory materials found in the Oxford edition of the *Kalevala* (1999) and the Penguin edition of “Njal’s Saga” (2001), by Keith Bosley and Robert Cook respectively. Several of these editions also contain such additional material as commentaries, glossaries, and synopses.

### **Literature on the Composers and Compositions**

Though more attention will be devoted here to the texts and journal articles dealing with this study’s music than was given to the literature about Nordic epics and sagas, there is in actuality far less of the former than the latter. Due to the paucity of English-language books that focus exclusively on Nordic art music, journal articles and compact disc liner notes constitute a large portion of the available literature on this subject. The bulk of the journal articles considered in this chapter concern Jón Leifs, rather than the many composers who are just briefly discussed in Chapter Four. Not considered in this chapter, though no less important, are the often fertile liner notes that accompany selected Nordic art music recordings. Though generally considered less respectable in academic circles than published books and journal articles, many of these liner notes have been written by top Nordic scholars. This is particularly true for the liner notes accompanying the BIS recordings of Leifs’s works, the majority of which have been written by respected Leifs scholars Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson and Ární Heimir Ingólfsson.

## Textbooks and Reference Works

For the most part, Nordic composers tend to be neglected in the majority of general music history textbooks, often being relegated to a few paragraphs in the chapters dealing with musical nationalism. Moreover, only Edvard Grieg and Jean Sibelius appear with any regularity in such books, with Carl Nielsen appearing less frequently. Even more infrequently found is any information on Nordic art music prior to or after these three seminal figures, or any information on art music in Sweden or Iceland. The sixth edition of *A History of Western Music* (2001), by Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca, for instance, includes only three pages of text on Nordic art music, the majority of which concerns the symphonies and tone poems of Sibelius, with only two paragraphs dedicated to Grieg and two sentences to Nielsen.

Likewise, K. Marie Stolba, in the most recent edition of her chronologically-based textbook *The Development of Western Music* (1998), devotes fewer than four pages to the whole of Nordic music history. While she does mention several of the lesser-known, but still quite influential, figures—including the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull and composer Richard Nordraak, the Swedish composers Hugo Alfvén and William Stenhammar, and the Finnish composer Robert Kajanus—their works and significance are basically given only a cursory glance. More attention is paid, commendably, to J. P. E. Hartmann and Niels Gade, in addition to Grieg, Sibelius, and Nielsen. Though none of these figures rate their own subheading in the body of the text, each is at least discussed briefly in terms of individual style and major compositions.

The topic-based approach to music history of *The Concise Oxford History of Music* (1979) by Gerald Abraham allows for the inclusion of slightly more information

on the major Nordic composers, albeit only for specific genres. Gade's name, for instance, appears on seven different pages, with only his concert overture *Efterklang af Ossian* (1839) receiving more than a quick reference. Grieg's name makes an appearance on no fewer than ten pages, but receives only notable attention for his piano music and art songs. Sibelius is mentioned by Abraham on four pages, one of which includes a single, albeit lengthy, paragraph on the composer's symphonies and tone poems. Nielsen's name, meanwhile, is relegated to a single footnote in a discussion of the Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni.

Nordic composers have fortunately fared a bit better in several reference works dedicated to the history of Western art music. Unique among these publications is the two-volume *Symphonic Program Music and Its Literary Sources* by Lawrence Casler. As one of the very few studies of its type, Casler's work contains numerous individual entries—each briefly comparing a programmatic orchestral composition to its respective piece of literature—on the *purely instrumental* symphonic poems, program symphonies, concert overtures, and other orchestral works of nearly 150 composers. Within the extensive contents of this work are entries on several Nordic compositions—including Sibelius's *Lemminkäinen Legends*, Nielsen's *Saga-drøm*, and Leif's *Saga Symphony*—which provide an excellent starting point for those unfamiliar with the music and literature of the Nordic countries.

Nordic composers also receive a good deal of attention in the second edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell. In addition to fairly lengthy entries covering both the art music and folk music of each of the five Nordic countries, this twenty-nine volume encyclopedic work contains an

entry on almost every notable composer in Nordic art music history, as well as a detailed works-list for each of the major individuals. Though Grieg, Sibelius, and Nielsen all receive lengthy consideration, however, Leifs does not. Nonetheless, this source provides an excellent starting point for background information on almost any given Nordic composer and his/her compositional style. Concerning Nordic music, credit must also be given to *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (1992), edited by Stanley Sadie, which contains entries on several of the more notable composers of Nordic opera as well as a few major Nordic operatic works.

Finally, a few more encyclopedic reference works should be cited for their worthy inclusion of entries on Nordic composers. The six-volume Centennial Edition of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (2000), edited by the late Nicolas Slonimsky, contains biographical entries and complete works lists, though almost no musical analysis, for many of the more notable composers in Nordic art music history. Similar, though more concise, is the Revised Edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* (1994) by Michael Kennedy. Concerning just Finnish and Icelandic music history respectively are the *Historical Dictionary of the Music and Musicians of Finland* (1997) by Ruth-Esther Hillila and Barbara Blanchard Hong and the *Dictionary of Icelandic Composers* (1997) by Marek Podhajski, the former noticeably missing works lists for the included composers.

## Studies on Nordic Music History

A number of books have been written in recent years that attempt to draw more attention to the wide field of Nordic art music, though only two have considered the history of music in all five Nordic countries. Because these texts provide general information on many countries and composers, they tend not to contain a large amount of analytical information on the music. Other studies, meanwhile, have focused on either the art music history of a specific Nordic country or on a specific Nordic composer. In general, such works, especially those in the latter category, provide in-depth information about specific composers and compositions. Taken together, these three groups of texts and their unique specialization constitute an invaluable part of the literature on Western art music.

*Scandinavian Music: A Short History* (1963), by John Horton, provides a general historical overview not only of art music in Scandinavia, but of art music in Finland and Iceland as well. Horton's study tends to be chronological, beginning in the pre-Christian era and working through the mid-twentieth century, but does include a few chapters on specific genres and individual countries within this approach. Randomly chosen musical examples serve to help illustrate some of the included composers' musical styles. Unfortunately, nearly half of the text is focused on the more Germanic aspects of Nordic art music prior to the nineteenth century, with many of the key composers and compositions of the Romantic period and twentieth century being unjustly neglected or entirely absent.

A more thorough overview of Nordic art music history, including information on the musical activities of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands,

and Åland, is to be found in *Nordic Art Music: From the Middle Ages to the Third Millennium* (2002) by Frederick Key Smith. Chronological in its approach—but paying closer attention to the development of those distinctively “Nordic” composers and compositions of the last two centuries than to the more continentally-influenced figures of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical eras—Smith’s book attempts to diminish any artistic divisions between the Nordic countries’ art music development by instead considering Nordic art music history as a single entity. Though musical examples and in-depth analyses are intentionally missing, information is included on nearly 250 Nordic composers and their works.

Also worth mentioning, despite its misleading title, is John H. Yoell’s book *The Nordic Sound* (1974), which actually only contains information on those Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish compositions made available on phonograph prior to the book’s publication. Aside from a short historical overview, the bulk of this study comprises a “Composers Gallery” containing short chapters on each of the forty-three included composers, the majority of which are from the twentieth century. Although these forty-three individuals and their recorded representative compositions provide a rather sketchy view of Scandinavian art music history, enough material tends to be included on each work to warrant mention of this book.

*New Music of the Nordic Countries* (2002), edited by John D. White, should also be included here for information on Nordic art music from the last half of the twentieth century. Divided into five parts, one for each country, this volume was written by several of today’s leading Nordic music scholars. A few of the essays contain musical examples and analysis, though this is somewhat inconsistent overall, as are stylistic features.

Unfortunately, this work is only somewhat useful for this dissertation due to its covered time frame. For instance, Jón Leifs is not discussed in any detail as he was born in 1899, thereby belonging to an older generation than White chose as the starting place for his essay on Icelandic music. This is in spite of the fact that this seminal Icelandic composer wrote several of his most important pieces after 1950 and can be considered nothing but a twentieth-century composer.

Considerably more focused on the music history of a particular country is *A History of Norwegian Music* (1991), originally in Norwegian, by Nils Grinde. In addition to containing chapters that trace the history of Norwegian art music “From the Stone Age to the Iron Age” to “Music Since 1950,” this rather extensive work contains a lengthy chapter on native folk music, as well as a shorter one on sacred music. Information on each of the many included Norwegian composers is rather thorough, structured biographically with the insertion of composition titles where appropriate, aided by the occasional inclusion of musical examples as well as illustrations and photographs. Rather than provide a short analysis of each mentioned composition, however, Grinde chose to focus his analytical attention on just one representative composition, or a few in some cases, by each major composer. Although overall a very solid work, the English translation of *A History of Norwegian Music* is not as musicologically useful as it could be due to its lack of original Norwegian composition titles.

*From Sibelius to Sallinen: Finnish Nationalism and the Music of Finland* (1989), by Lisa de Grog, has a similar weakness in that its author was inconsistent concerning the use original Finnish titles or their English equivalents in her discussion of various Finnish art music compositions. Overall, however, this work provides valuable

information on a number of better-known Finnish composers from the last 150 years. Following a lengthy, multi-chapter analysis of Sibelius and his music, de Gorog discusses each of her chosen subjects in relation to Sibelius's enormous contribution to Finnish music history. While this approach tends to remind the reader of the inescapable shadow cast by the Finnish master composer over all of his musical descendents, it also provides a realistic portrait of Finnish art music composition in the twentieth century and its debt to Sibelius's labor.

The Finnish Music Information Centre, meanwhile, has published a number of informative books over the past decade on the art music history of Finland. *Finnish Orchestral Music 1* (1995), *Finnish Orchestral Music 2* (1995), *Finnish Concertos* (1995), *Finnish Piano Music* (1997), and *Finnish Chamber Music* (2001), all by Kimmo Korhonen, focus in earnest on their respective genre from shortly before Sibelius to the most recent generation of Finnish composers. Pekka Hako, on the other hand, contributed *Finnish Opera* (2002), which also covers Finnish art music history from the years just before Sibelius's birth into the new millennium. FIMIC's most recent publication, *Inventing Finnish Music: Contemporary Composers from Medieval to Modern* (2003), also by Korhonen, is an overarching view of the history of Finnish art music. Although many composers are included, there are no musical examples and little analysis in this work.

### **Studies on Individual Composers**

In addition to the general histories of Nordic art music, several texts exist that cover each of the three major Nordic composers, though unfortunately no English-language study on Jón Leifs has yet been published. Among the earliest of such works

are *Sibelius* (1934) by Cecil Gray, *Edvard Grieg* (1938) by David Monrad Johansen, and *Grieg: A Symposium* (1950), edited by Gerald Abraham. The first two of these works provide extensive biographical information on their respective composer, as well as some analytical information on compositions. Abraham's study, meanwhile, is divided into nine different essays by varying authors on such subjects as the composer's orchestral music, piano concerto, chamber music, piano music, songs, stage works, and choral music. Though none of these essays include musical examples, each does contain analyses of their respective compositions.

One of the most recent studies on Grieg, *Edvard Grieg: The Man and the Artist* (1988) by Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, contains both extensive biographical and analytical information on the composer and his music respectively. Arranged chronologically, from Grieg's birth to his death, this richly detailed text considers each of the composer's major works, as well as many minor ones, concurrently with his life. Musical examples and illustrations add to the discussion, while numerous sidebars provide such pertinent primary source material as diary entries, excerpts from correspondence, and published articles. Particularly useful for this dissertation is a lengthy section on *Olav Trygvason*, featuring background and historical information on the opera, excerpts from the score, and several passages from the composer's personal writings and correspondence containing first-hand accounts of the work's composition.

A wealth of additional primary source material on Grieg may be found in the two later volumes *Edvard Grieg: Letters to Colleagues and Friends* (2000) and *Edvard Grieg: Diaries, Articles, Speeches* (2001), both edited by Finn Benestad and translated by William H. Halverson. The first of these works contains over 500 letters, arranged

alphabetically by recipient, written by the composer to various individuals between 1863 and 1907. The second of these works gathers all of the composer's important writings from 1865 to 1907, including excerpts from such sources as the composer's diaries, articles on fellow composers and various other topics from journals and newspapers, and public addresses. Both of these texts include an index of Grieg's compositions, thereby allowing the reader to find the composer's first-hand thoughts about a specific work or works.

Erik Tawaststjerna's five-volume study on Jean Sibelius, published both in Finnish and Swedish and completed by Fru Gitta Henning after the biographer's death in 1993, is by far the most thorough and elaborate project ever undertaken on a Nordic composer. This present dissertation makes use of Robert Layton's three-volume English-translation of Tawaststjerna and Henning's work: *Sibelius: Volume I – 1865-1905* (1976), *Sibelius: Volume II – 1904-1914* (1986), and *Sibelius: Volume III – 1914-1957* (1997). Each of these three chronological volumes contains extensive biographical information, exhaustive analysis of major works, numerous musical examples, and autobiographical insights from the composer's own voice or hand. Tawaststjerna's discussion of Sibelius's *Lemminkäinen Legends*, as with the majority of the composer's programmatic works, however, only summarizes the literary influence of the *Kalevala*, rather than providing an in-depth textual/musical analysis.

Robert Layton's single-volume study on the composer, *Sibelius* (1993), draws largely from his Tawaststjerna translations, but also from his own research into the composer's life and analysis of his works. Rather than tracing Sibelius's output chronologically, however, as is done by Tawaststjerna, Layton considers each of the

musical genres to which the composer contributed in separate chapters. Concerning Sibelius's use of the *Kalevala*, Layton includes an entire chapter titled "*Kullervo* and the *Kalevala*" which investigates the connection between the program symphony and the epic. Similar in construct is Robert Simpson's work on Denmark's leading composer, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist* (1979). Following a short introduction, the author provides a separate chapter on each of the composer's six symphonies, as well as additional chapters on other genres. *Saga-drøm*, Nielsen's only composition based on Nordic saga material, is considered briefly in a chapter titled "Lesser Orchestral Music."

*The Sibelius Companion* (1996), edited by Glenda Dawn Goss, and *Sibelius Studies* (2000), edited by Timothy L. Jackson and Veijo Murtomäki, contain a wealth of information on the Finnish composer and his various contributions to Nordic art music history. Through the course of numerous essays, by an esteemed assortment of scholars, these two collections provide detailed information on various aspects of the composer's life and compositional style, as well as those on specific works. Further, the composer's use of the *Kalevala* is discussed in both of these collections. Likewise, *The Nielsen Companion* (1994), edited by Mina Miller, is an essential source of information on the Danish composer. Like those on Sibelius, this collection contains a number of essays, again by various scholars, considering a wide variety of topics.

### **Literature on Jón Leifs**

Until recently, very little has been written in the English language about Iceland's most significant art music composer, Jón Leifs (1899-1968). Even today, the literature includes just a single MFA thesis and a few journal articles, though the two most renowned Leifs scholars—Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson and Árni Heimir Ingólfsson—are

currently working on an Icelandic biography that will eventually be translated into English.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Ragnarsson and Ingólfsson have written the majority of the liner notes accompanying the BIS recordings of Leifs's works.<sup>2</sup> Mention should also be made of the official Jón Leifs website—[www.jonleifs.is](http://www.jonleifs.is)—under the auspices of Iceland's National University Library. Produced by The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service and The Icelandic Music Information Centre, the English version of this site, at the time of this writing anyhow, contains more information on the composer and his music than perhaps any other single source. Aside from these resources, however, very little scholarly material exists on this seminal Nordic composer.

Though today somewhat outdated by modern Icelandic scholarship, the first major posthumous study on Jón Leifs—in English or any other language, including Icelandic—was the MFA Thesis of Hjalmar Helgi Ragnarsson (b. 1952). Completed in 1980 for Cornell University, this work consists of two parts. The first part, “Six Songs to Icelandic Poems,” is simply an early composition by Ragnarsson, who is today one of Iceland's leading composers. The second part, however, “Jón Leifs, Icelandic Composer: Historical Background, Biography, Analysis of Selected Works,” contains a forty-page history on Icelandic music, followed by a twenty-page biography of Leifs. Both of these sections remain quite valuable in light of the lack of other English resources. Ragnarsson added further value to the second part of his thesis by including the analysis of three Leifs

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<sup>1</sup> This information was related to the author through his correspondence with both Ragnarsson and Ingólfsson.

<sup>2</sup> The Swedish record label is currently in the process of recording Jón Leifs entire oeuvre—over sixty opus numbers—with the bulk of his most notable works already having been released.

scores: *Three Edda Songs*, op. 4; *Iceland Overture*, op. 9; and *Organ Prelude*, op. 16/3.

Though this work was written for an MFA degree rather than a PhD, it must be noted that its author is one of today's leading Jón Leifs scholars. In addition, this thesis is almost solely responsible for prompting current scholarship involving Leifs and his music.

In the article "Jón Leifs, Iceland's Sanctified Son" from *Scandinavian Review* (85/2; 1997), Alda Sigmundsdóttir provides a brief overview of the composer's life and works. Though considerably more biographical than musicological, given the nature of the journal, this article is primarily aimed at drawing attention to the composer's growing popularity, both scholarly and commercially. Similar in content and purpose is Árni Heimir Ingólfsson's article, "Composing the North: Jón Leifs," from *Nordic Sounds* (2/1999). Written in conjunction with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Leifs's birth, Ingólfsson's is again largely biographical, though it also contains a fair amount of information on the composer's works and musical style. Also included in this article is a list of available recordings of Leifs's works.

The most useful journal article on Leifs's works and compositional style is "Jón Leifs (1899-1968)" by John Pickard from *Tempo* (208; 1999). Again using Leifs's recent popularity as a starting point, Pickard provides detailed biographical information as concerns the composer's decision to pursue an "Icelandic" course in his music. The basic principles behind Leifs's musical language are also explored in great detail—far exceeding that of any other available English-language source—particularly the composer's use of Icelandic folk music as the basis for the composition of a number of his finest art music scores. Within this discussion, which includes several useful musical examples, Pickard provides basic analyses of a few of Leifs's signature compositions,

including *25 Icelandic Folksongs*, the *Saga Symphony*, *Hekla*, *Geysir*, and *Dettifoss*.

Pickard rounds off his article with a lengthy discussion of Jón Leifs's three massive *Edda* oratorios.

### CHAPTER 3

#### MYTH, LEGEND, HISTORY: THE EPICS AND SAGAS

In terms of familiarity to Western culture, Nordic mythology is second only to that of the Greeks and Romans, with the names Odin, Thor, and Loki being almost as familiar as Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. Such legendary characters as Sigurd the Dragon-slayer, Hamlet, Ólaf Tryggvason, and Ólaf Haraldsson (Saint Ólaf), as well as the Finnish heroes Väinämöinen and Lemminkäinen, also hold a special place in the hearts and minds of many Europeans and Americans. Though these figures appear in countless books and stories, the origin of almost every Nordic god or hero may be found in at least one of five primary sources—the *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Kalevala*, *Heimskringla*, and/or *Gesta Danorum*—or in one or more of the numerous Icelandic Sagas.

This chapter offers a synopsis and brief overview of each of these six literary sources. As previously mentioned, these six sources are collectively referred to as “epics and sagas” in this dissertation for the sake of convenience, despite the fact that some do not technically meet either definition. Further, for the sake of an orderly discussion, these works have been arranged in this chapter on a spectrum from mythological to legendary to historical. Nevertheless, when referring to their content as a whole, the shorter label “myth and legend” will be used as the two “historical” works—*Heimskringla* and *Gesta Danorum*—contain legendary events as well. Finally, the term

“Norse,” as in “Norse gods,” refers to the shared mythological heritage of just Scandinavia and Iceland, not of Finland as well.

### ***The Poetic Edda and Prose Edda***

The *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda* are the greatest, and perhaps most reliable, extant sources of Norse mythology. Though separate works—the former anonymous, the latter written by the renowned Icelandic poet Snorri Sturluson—both provide extensive information on ancient Scandinavian and Icelandic beliefs, particularly those concerning Odin, Frey, Thor, Loki, and the rest of the Norse pantheon of the *Æsir* (gods). As such, they each hold an important place in the hearts and minds of the Nordic people, their myths and legends having permeated nearly all aspects of Nordic society.

The *Poetic Edda*, or *Elder Edda*, is perhaps the more elaborate of these two texts and contains the oldest material concerning Norse mythology. Nevertheless, it was not permanently recorded in writing until the mid-thirteenth century, at least a few decades after Snorri’s composition of the *Prose Edda*. According to Lee M. Hollander, in the Introduction to his translation of the *Poetic Edda*, the work serves an important purpose for the Teutonic race: “it is a repository, in poetic form, of their mythology and much of their heroic lore, bodying forth both the ethical views and the cultural life of the North during the late heathen and early Christian times.”<sup>1</sup>

The *Poetic Edda* contains over thirty poems—the majority of which were composed in Norway or Iceland between the ninth and twelfth centuries—gathered from

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<sup>1</sup> Lee M. Hollander, trans., General Introduction to *The Poetic Edda*, Revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962) ix.

several different sources.<sup>2</sup> The most important of these sources, the *Codex Regius No. 2365* (Danish Royal Manuscript No. 2365), was committed to paper no later than 1280 C.E. and consists of the bulk of poems that comprise the work. All but a few of the remaining poems found in the *Poetic Edda* come from a manuscript fragment known simply as AM 748, from the Danish Arnemagnæan Collection. Further, one lone poem is derived from the massive *Codex No. 1005*, while two poems are found in early manuscripts of Snorri's *Prose Edda*.

Structurally, the type of poetry found in the *Poetic Edda* is known, quite logically, as “Eddic poetry.” According to John Lindow, in his *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, “In form, the eddic poems are short stanzaic poems that rely chiefly on two meters, *fornyrðislag*, ‘old way of composing,’ and *ljóðahátt*, ‘song meter’.”<sup>3</sup> The former type is not unlike that found in the Old English epic *Beowulf*—consisting of eight rhythmically-balanced half-verses per stanza—and accounts for the vast majority of the poetry found in the *Poetic Edda*, as in the following example from the opening of “Völuspá”:

Hljóðs bið eg allar  
helgar kindir,  
meiri og minni  
mögu Heimdallar.  
Viltu að eg, Valföður,  
vel fyr telja  
forn spjöll fira,  
þau er fremst um man.

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<sup>2</sup> Hollander, xvii-xix.

<sup>3</sup> John Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2001) 14.

*Ljóðaháttir*, meanwhile, is more complex—consisting of two sets of two rhythmically-balanced half-verses and one longer independent third verse per half stanza, thereby forming a whole stanza of six verses—and is also less common than *fornyrðislag*. The following example is from “Hávamál”:

Sá er sæll  
er sjálfur um á  
lof og vit meðan lifir.  
Því að ill ráð  
hefir maður oft þegið  
annars brjóstum úr.

To again quote Lee M. Hollander, the Eddic poems that constitute the *Prose Edda* have three important characteristics that set them apart from other forms of Norse poetry, particularly the skaldic verse featured in Snorri’s *Prose Edda* and *Heimskringla*, many of the Icelandic sagas, and other Nordic texts: “Their matter is the mythology, the ethical conceptions, and the heroic lore of the ancient North; they are all composed in a comparatively simple style, and in the simplest measures; and, like the later folk songs and ballads, they are anonymous and objective, never betraying the feelings or attitudes of their authors.”<sup>4</sup>

The first set of poems in the *Poetic Edda* is mythological in nature and consists of “Völuspá” (Prophecy of the Seeress), a synopsis of the entirety of Norse mythology, from creation to destruction to rebirth; “Hávamál” (The Sayings of Odin), “Vafþrúðnismál” (The Lay of Vafþrúðnir), and “Grímnismál” (The Lay of Grímnir), all of which concern the wisdom of Odin, the principal deity in Norse mythology; “Skírnismál” (The Lay of Skírnir), a poem concerned with the fertility god Frey and his wooing of a giantess;

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<sup>4</sup> Hollander, xv.

“Hárbarzljóð” (The Lay of Hárbard), “Hymiskviða” (The Lay of Hymir), “Lokasenna” (The Flying of Loki), “Þrymskviða” (The Lay of Thrym), and “Alvíssmál” (The Lay of Alvis), all of which are concerned with the deeds of Thor, the physically strongest of the gods.

Aside from two more poems dealing with mythological material—“Baldrs draumar” (Baldr’s Dreams) and “Rígsþula” (The Lay of Rig)—the remainder of the *Poetic Edda* contains a variety of heroic poems, though the gods remain important figures in much of this poetry. The most notable of these are “Svipdagsmál” (The Lay of Svipdag), which deals with the hero Svipdag and contains “Grógaldur” (The Spell of Gróa); “Helgakviða Hundingsbana I-II” (The First and Second Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer), concerning the hero Helgi and his involvement with the Valkyries; and “Guðrúnarkviða I-III” (The First, Second, and Third Lay of Guðrún), about the life and struggles of the tragic heroine Guðrún.

Though the term “Edda,” borrowed from Snorri’s *Prose Edda*, was incorrectly assigned to this poetic collection by an Icelandic bishop in the mid-seventeenth century, it has nonetheless remained, causing occasional confusion and, as previously stated, leading to the use of the term “Eddic poetry” to describe its internal poetic structure. In fact, it is today generally supposed that Snorri’s term “Edda” is related to the parsonage in which he was raised, Oddi, and may actually be translated as “the Book of Oddi.”<sup>5</sup> As such is almost certainly the case, the term actually has absolutely nothing to do with the previously-discussed collection of mythology now known as the *Poetic Edda*, but has nonetheless remained as its title.

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<sup>5</sup> Hollander, xii-xiii.

It is almost certain, however, that the Icelandic writer and statesman Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) had at least portions of the Eddic poetry that would become the *Poetic Edda* in his possession at the time he wrote his *Prose Edda* around 1220 C.E. Though mythological references are scattered throughout this four-section work, “[to] all intents and purposes this *Edda* of Snorri’s is a textbook,” concerning Icelandic poetry—“one of the most original and entertaining ever written.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, the most useful section of the *Prose Edda*, as far as the dedicated study of Norse mythology is concerned, is the second—“Gylfaginning” (The Beguiling of Gylfi)—which is essentially an elaboration of the mythological events found in the *Poetic Edda*.

“Gylfaginning” is prefaced, however, by a short “Prologue,” whose purpose it is to place the entire work within the context of Christianity. In so doing, the pagan mythology presented in the *Prose Edda* was made more acceptable for the Christian author’s largely Christian audience. Following “Gylfaginning,” meanwhile, are the two sections of the *Prose Edda* most concerned with poetics—“Skáldskaparmál” (The Language of Poetry) and “Háttatal” (Tally of Metres)—though all three of these sections are largely prose in construct, as the title of Snorri’s work suggests. Nevertheless, as the *Prose Edda* is a medieval treatise on Icelandic poetry, and as is common in other pieces of Old Norse literature, all three of these sections also contain numerous examples of verse, specifically of the skaldic genre.

In contrast to Eddic poetry, skaldic poetry is typically more elaborate in diction and style, and subjective rather than objective, “extolling the latest exploits of the king or commenting on some incident in the poet’s own life. This makes for actuality in skaldic

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<sup>6</sup> Hollander, xi.

poems.”<sup>7</sup> The standard meter of skaldic poetry, *dróttkvætt*, features a stanza consisting of eight six-syllable lines, each with a feminine ending, the odd lines containing two stressed alliterations and the even lines one, forming a couplet, with odd lines also containing two half-rhymes and even lines two full rhymes. Because of these complexities, skaldic poetry was only occasionally written anonymously. The following example of *dróttkvætt* is from “Hattatal”:

Lætr sá, er Hákun heitir,  
hann rekkir lið, bannat,  
jörð kann frelsa, fyrðum  
friðrofs, konungr, ofsa.  
Sjalfr ræðr allt ok Elfar  
ungr stillir sá milli,  
gramr á gift at fremri,  
Gandvíkr jöfurr landi.

### **The Kalevala**

Independent from the Norse mythology of Scandinavia and Iceland is the legendary lore of Finland. Known collectively as the *Kalevala*, and being constructed of Kalevala poetry, this body of Finnish-language myth and legend is more akin to that of the Baltic lands than of Scandinavia and Iceland, thereby making it unique among ancient Nordic literature. Nevertheless, as Finland is almost universally considered a Nordic country, its myths and legends must also be considered Nordic. Further, the numinous aspects of the *Kalevala* place it somewhat closer thematically to the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda* than to the *Heimskringla* and *Gesta Danorum*, hence its placement before the Icelandic sagas in this discussion.

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<sup>7</sup> Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York: John Hopkins Press/American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1957) 45.

The *Kalevala* holds the distinction of being the youngest literary source of all the Nordic epics and sagas, at least as far as its collection and publication is concerned. Completed and published in its final form in 1849 as the *New Kalevala*, though today simply called *Kalevala*, the lengthy poetic work quickly became regarded as the Finnish national epic. As such, it has had a profound nationalistic impact on countless Finnish writers, artists, and composers, as well as the Finnish people themselves. The *Kalevala*, for instance, played an influential role in Finland's revolt against, and subsequent independence from, the Russian Empire in 1917.

In reference to the epic, Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr., in the Foreword to his 1963 Harvard University Press translation, described it as "essentially a conflation and concatenation of a considerable number and variety of traditional songs, narrative, lyric, and magic, sung by unlettered singers, male and female, living to a great extent in northern Karelia in the general vicinity of Archangel."<sup>8</sup> Though lacking any indication of the work's narrative content, this definition is an apt introduction to the origin and construction of this literary and mythological treasure which today stands alongside the Edda, Heimskringla, and Icelandic sagas in terms of Nordic cultural importance.

The *Kalevala* is basically the end result of years of labor by Finnish physician and folklorist Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884), though he was certainly not the first individual to take notice of Finland's rich folklore heritage. In the mid-1500's, Bishop Mikael Agricola, who brought the Reformation to Finland, showed an interest in Finnish folk poetry as linguistic expression. Later, Henrik Gabriel Porthan (1739-1804), the most

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr., trans., Foreword to Elias Lönnrot, *The Kalevala* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1963) xiii.

respected Finnish scholar of his day, successfully led a movement among his contemporaries to greatly elevate scholarly interest in Finland's native folk poetry. Finally, it was Carl Axel Gottlund (1796-1875), a professor at the University of Helsinki, who first proposed gathering Finland's large body of folk poetry into a single volume.

Nevertheless, it was Elias Lönnrot who would, during the course of several rural medical assignments in southeast Finland, collect the many Finnish folk songs that later, after extensive analysis and compilation, would serve as the basis for the present-day *Kalevala*. Though some of his contemporaries, such as Julius Krohn (1835-1888), accused Lönnrot of tampering with the material he had gathered in order to fit it into a literary, narrative whole, the vast majority of the *Kalevala* is original folk material. "As a synthesis and adaptation of this material, however," as Juha Y. Pentikäinen states in *Kalevala Mythology*, "the *Kalevala* is Lönnrot's aesthetic creation."<sup>9</sup>

Though the poetic songs collected by Lönnrot were often quite ancient in origin, dating back to 500 C.E. in a few cases, they had not been gathered, compared, or arranged in any sort of logical order prior to Lönnrot's intervention. These songs, or "runes" as they are properly known, were collected primarily from folk singers in the White Sea Karelia district of Finland. Almost universally, each rune in the *Kalevala* is in *Kalevala meter*, a unique poetic structure that "seems to be basically a trochaic tetrameter measured quantitatively—that is, four feet each consisting of a long and a short syllable."<sup>10</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) later emulated this poetic meter

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<sup>9</sup> Juha Y. Pentikäinen, *Kalevala Mythology*, Expanded edition, Ritva Poom, trans. and ed. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999) 2.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Bosley, trans., Foreword to Elias Lönnrot, *The Kalevala* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) xxi.

in his epic American poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855). The following example of *Kalevala meter* is from “The Singing Match” as found in the Finnish national epic:

Vaka vanha Väinämöinen  
 elelevi aikojansa  
 noilla Väinölän ahoilla,  
 Kalevalan kankahilla.  
 Laulelevi virsiänsä,  
 laulelevi, taitelevi.

The *Kalevala* is built of fifty long narrative poems, or “cantos,” each of which contains numerous runes, giving the epic a total length of 22,795 lines. The majority of these cantos concern the *Kalevala*’s three principal heroes—the “eternal sage” Väinämöinen, the “eternal smith” Ilmarinen, and “wanton” Lemminkäinen—and their quest to retrieve the Sampo—a magical three-sided mill that grinds out unlimited amounts of grain, salt, and money—from the evil residents of North Farm, or Pohjola. Several less important plots are presented within the course of the epic as well, the most notable involving such characters as the sorrowful Aino, the powerful and tragic Kullervo, the beautiful but fickle Kyllikki, and the foolish Joukahainen.

### The Icelandic Sagas

The numerous texts that may be generically labeled as “Icelandic sagas”—“saga” translating as “story”—constitute what is by far one of the largest single collections of early medieval literature in existence. Containing over a hundred sagas dealing with the lives and deeds of countless Nordic figures, this unique body of lore may be divided into three main categories—*fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas), *konungasögur* (kings’ sagas), and *Islendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders)—as well as several less notable categories. The vast majority of Icelandic sagas were written between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, though their plots focus primarily on the earlier age of the Vikings, or “Saga

Age.” Further, the sagas generally feature prose texts, with many of them containing poetic material as well.

As far as medieval literature is concerned, the Icelandic sagas were far ahead of their time, being considerably more modern than the bulk of contemporary works. This is due in large part to their narrative objectivity. “They never describe the thoughts or feelings of the characters; instead, the characters portray themselves with their words and actions. Everything is observed from the outside, and only those events are related which could have been seen or reported,” states Jónas Kristjánsson in the Foreward to *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. “Events and characters are taken directly from reality or its stylised representation, which creates a wealth of personalities, some of them complex and enigmatic, just as in life itself.”<sup>11</sup>

Of the *fornaldarsögur*, the greatest is the anonymous “Völsunga saga” (The Saga of the Volsungs), which deals largely with the mythology of the Æsir, as well as other Eddic material. Jesse L. Byock, in his Introduction to the saga, summarizes the works contents hence: “*The Saga of the Volsungs* recounts runic knowledge, princely jealousies, betrayals, unrequited love, the vengeance of a barbarian queen, greedy schemes of Attila the Hun, and the mythic deeds of the dragon slayer, Sigurd the Volsung.”<sup>12</sup> The most noteworthy of the *konungasögur*, meanwhile, are those contained in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*—especially “Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar” (The Saga of Ólaf Tryggvason)

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<sup>11</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., Foreward to Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume 1 (Reykjavík, Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997) xi.

<sup>12</sup> Jesse L. Byock, Introduction to *The Saga of the Volsungs* (London: Penguin Classics, 1999) 1.

and “Óláfs saga Helga” (The Saga of Saint Óláf)—which is discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

The *Islendingasögur*, on the other hand, “are the crowning achievement of medieval narrative art in Scandinavia, and when people speak of ‘the Icelandic sagas’ they usually refer to the *Islendinga sögur*. . . . In spirit the *Islendinga sögur* are much like epics.”<sup>13</sup> Popularly known as “family sagas”—due to their focus on notable Icelandic and Norwegian figures—the approximately thirty anonymous works that make up this category deal with material that is as essentially legendary, though somewhat historical as well. For this reason, they are being placed just prior to the *Heimskringla* and *Gesta Danorum* in this discussion.

Among the most renowned of the family sagas are “Egils saga” (The Saga of Egil), “Laxdæla saga” (The Saga of the People of Laxardal), “Fóstbræðra Saga” (The Saga of the Sworn Brothers), “Eyrbyggja saga” (The Saga of the People of Eyri), “Gísla saga” (The Saga of Gisli Sursson), “Bandamanna saga” (The Saga of the Confederates), “Gunnlaugs saga” (The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue), “Njáls saga” (The Saga of Njal), “Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða” (The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey’s Godi), and “Grettis saga” (The Saga of Grettir the Strong). Although only “Laxdæla saga,” “Fóstbræðra Saga,” “Njáls saga,” and “Grettis saga” need be considered for this study, “common motifs, together with the time and place . . . , the subject matter . . . , character types, standardized descriptions of battles and feasts, common thematic concerns and the

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<sup>13</sup> Vidar Hreinsson, ed., Introduction to *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume 1 (Reykjavík, Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997) xxx.

general social setting, make the Sagas of Icelanders a homogeneous literary genre.”<sup>14</sup>

Further, the Icelandic family sagas provide an invaluable, despite fictionalized, glimpse into Iceland’s distant past, its customs, and traditions.

“*Laxdæla saga*” and “*Fóstbræðra Saga*” are thought to be two of the older family sagas, possibly having been written towards the middle of the thirteenth century. The former work is a superb example of a family saga as most of its major characters are related in some fashion. According to Stefán Einarsson, “In *Laxdæla saga* . . . one finds folk-lore, the old Viking spirit of *Egils saga*, the heroism of the Eddic poems, and the new romantic spirit mixed as so many ingredients in a cocktail.”<sup>15</sup> Further, the romantic central character, Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, is quite possibly the most memorable woman in all of the family sagas. “*Fóstbræðra Saga*,” meanwhile, is a warrior tale concerning the adventures of the sworn brothers Þorgeir and Þormóður. It is somewhat unusual, however, “in that while it has its share of magic, it generally depends only marginally on a belief in fate, forebodings and omens.”<sup>16</sup>

“*Njáls saga*” is generally considered the greatest of the family sagas, if for no other reason than its intricately interwoven plot: “It is not a biography, not a family saga, but a complex chain of dramatic events fashioned by the skilful artist into a mighty trilogy, ruled by inexorable fate.”<sup>17</sup> Composed in the late thirteenth century, the work is

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Cook, Introduction to *Njal's Saga* (London: Penguin, 2001) x.

<sup>15</sup> Einarsson, 140.

<sup>16</sup> Vidar Hreinsson, ed., Preface to “The Saga of the Sworn Brothers” from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume 2 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997) 329.

<sup>17</sup> Einarsson, 146.

by far the longest of all the family sagas, as well as perhaps the most artistic. The plot of “Njáls saga” concerns two central, but contrary characters—the exceptionally wise lawyer Njáll Þorgeirsson and the formidably strong warrior Gunnar Hámundarson—and the various feuds in which they become entwined and which eventually lead to each of their deaths. In addition to various subplots concerning numerous lesser figures, the work also includes a good deal of information on the evolution of Norse law and legal procedure.<sup>18</sup> As a result, “Njál’s Saga” is particularly important from a sociological aspect as it serves as an illustration of Iceland’s transformation from a tribal society governed by violence to a more unified national society governed by law.

Finally, “Grettis saga,” written around the year 1400, concerns the tragic, but heroic character Grettir, who, through supernatural misfortune, is condemned to be an outlaw and have an unending fear of the dark. The saga—one of the most popular in the entire canon of Icelandic sagas—fuses many diverse elements into its rich plot, including folklore, adventure stories, tales of the paranormal, and even farce. “This colorful tapestry forms the background to the portrayal of Grettir, which stands out from other saga characterisation for its psychological depth,” states Vidar Hreinsson, “At the same time, no other saga hero has held such appeal to the Icelanders themselves, and is widely seen as personifying the national character.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Vidar Hreinsson, ed., Preface to “Njal’s Saga” from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume 3 (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997) 1.

<sup>19</sup> Vidar Hreinsson, ed., Preface to “The Saga of Grettir the Strong” from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume 2 (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997) 49.

### ***The Heimskringla and Gesta Danorum***

Though containing both mythological and legendary elements, the *Heimskringla* and *Gesta Danorum* are primarily historical literary works. Serving respectively as two of the earliest extant histories of Norway and Denmark, the *Heimskringla* and the *Gesta Danorum* remain perhaps the most dependable sources of information on Scandinavia's past prior to the late-Middle Ages. As is often the case with medieval historical texts, however, both works contain a wealth of mythological and legendary material as well. It is partly for this reason that though they are often referred to as "historical" in the following discussion, they are overall considered "legendary" for the sake of this dissertation.

The *Heimskringla* (The Disc of the World)—commonly known as "The History of the Kings of Norway"—composed by the Icelandic writer and statesman Snorri Sturluson around 1230 C.E., finds prose and small portions of skaldic poetry combined into a lengthy collection of sagas that fit into the category *konungasögur* (kings' sagas). Beginning in the first millennium, Snorri's text traces the history of Norway's kingship from the mythological age to the late twelfth century. Numerous kings are named and described throughout the work, with many receiving their own individual sagas. Perhaps most significant, however, is Snorri's account of the transformation of Norway, as well as other parts of the Nordic world under Norwegian control, from a land of pagan beliefs and rituals to one forcibly converted to Christianity.

Nevertheless, as may be expected of a historical work from the Middle Ages, Snorri's text contains many factual and chronological errors. This is due largely to the sources he consulted in writing the *Heimskringla*, which included a variety of previously

composed history texts concerning Norway and Iceland, as well as manuscripts on Norse mythology and legend. Skaldic poetry also served to provide the writer with some of his material, poetry being considered a reliable source of information at the time. “But it is generally considered that,” explains Hollander, “while making abundant use of them, he stands high above all his predecessors in deliberately omitting, or at least rationalizing, what he considers less credible.”<sup>20</sup>

Of the sixteen individual sagas that constitute Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, a few are particularly noteworthy both for their content and literary merit. “Ynglinga saga” (The Saga of the Ynglings), the first part of the work, is largely mythological in scope, tracing the lineage of the Swedish Yngling dynasty back to its divine origins. This saga may be considered yet another important source of information on such figures as Odin, Thor, and Frey. More historically accurate, though certainly containing many legendary elements as well, are “Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar” (The Saga of Ólaf Tryggvason) and “Óláfs saga Helga” (The Saga of Saint Ólaf).

The former saga recounts the early adventures and religious conversion of Norway’s most infamous Viking king, Ólaf Tryggvason (r. 995-1000), as well as the founding of Trondheim, and the violent conversion of much of the Norwegian kingdom to Christianity. “Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar,” the sixth saga in Snorri’s work and the second longest, is followed immediately by the longest and most important part of the *Heimskringla*, “Óláfs saga Helga.” Narrating the life and leadership of perhaps the most beloved Nordic ruler, “Óláfs saga Helga” is as much a religious statement as it is history,

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<sup>20</sup> Lee M. Hollander, trans., Introduction to Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin: University of Texas, 1964) xix-xx.

with the bulk of its material focusing on the Christian faith and miraculous deeds of Óláf Haraldsson (r. 1015-28), the Norwegian king who would later be known simply as Saint Óláf.

Less memorable, though just as historically important, are the stories related in the *Gesta Danorum*, or *Historia Danica* (The Deeds of the Danes, or The Danish History), written around 1200 C.E. by the Danish scholar Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1150-1220). Saxo, like Snorri, also consulted earlier written texts, as well as poetry, in the construction of his history. Concerning the author's rationale for writing the *Gesta Danorum*, "Saxo's intentions are made very clear in the first sentence: the purpose of his book is to 'glorify the fatherland'," according to Hilda Ellis Davidson, "[As] well as glorifying his country, he hoped to civilize it, and to produce proof of its culture before the eyes of the learned world."<sup>21</sup>

In the hopes of elevating his task further, Saxo wrote the *Gesta Danorum* in Latin rather than the vernacular, in order to produce a work of Virgilian quality and scholarship. Like Snorri's *Heimskringla*, the *Gesta Danorum* contains the names, descriptions, and deeds of numerous kings, though in this case, Danish kings. Comprised of sixteen books, rather than sagas, despite interior saga-like episodes, the work is divided into two sections of unequal length. The second section, which contains seven prose books primarily concerned with describing the wars and deeds of Denmark and its kings, is generally considered the less interesting of the two. Saxo also spends a good

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<sup>21</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, ed., Introduction to Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes: Books I-IX*, Peter Fisher, trans. (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1996) 1-2.

deal of time in this section extolling the achievements of Archbishop Absalon (c. 1128-1201), for whom he worked at the time he wrote the *Gesta Danorum*.

Much more important and interesting, however, is the first section of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*. Containing nine prose books—interspersed with poetry, ballads, and songs—this section recounts many myths and legends from Denmark's past. Also found in this first section is the history of the ninth-century Prince Amleth, who would be made even more famous later by William Shakespeare in his monumental play, *Hamlet*. In specific connection with the mythological and legendary material of the first section of the *Gesta Danorum*, to again quote Davidson, "[Saxo was] a man with great enthusiasm for tales of heroic action, dedicated to the task of inspiring his countrymen to emulate the warlike deeds of their ancestors."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Davidson, 3.

#### CHAPTER 4

#### NORDIC ART MUSIC BASED ON THE EPICS AND SAGAS

The myths and legends found in the *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Kalevala*, Icelandic sagas, *Heimskringla*, and *Gesta Danorum* have permeated Nordic society, giving rise to many pieces of literature, art, and music that bear their direct influence. Numerous literary works have been created by poets and authors—including Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger (1779-1850), Nicolai Grundtvig (1783-1872), Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), and Eino Leino (1878-1926)—who have found inspiration in the rich milieu of these national epics and sagas. Likewise, many Nordic artists—such as Hermann Ernst Freund (1786-1840) and Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931)—have been inspired to create sculptures and paintings based on their respective country's own myths and legends.

Beginning with the opera *Balders Død*, meanwhile, Nordic epics and sagas have played an important nationalistic role in the creation of Nordic art music. Written by Johann Ernst Hartmann (1726-93), *Det heroiske Syngespil Balders Død* (The Heroic *Singspiel* of the Death of Balder; 1779) sets a Danish libretto by Johannes Ewald (1743-81) based on material from the *Prose Edda*. Rather than being in the popular Italianate style of the day, Hartmann chose a more dramatic approach for the opera by making extensive use of choral numbers. Particularly interesting is its Valkyrie music, which

anticipates that found in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* by Richard Wagner (1813-83).<sup>1</sup> “The confrontation with this world of Scandinavian pre-history and its gods struck Hartmann like a bolt of lightning,” states Johannes Mulvad, “and the inspiration still shines out of the pages of this score.”<sup>2</sup>

About half of the Nordic art music scores that are based on Nordic epics and sagas are either purely orchestral or are orchestral with vocal parts drawn directly from the literature. Of the remaining works, a few are art songs or pieces for a *cappella* choir that also directly quote their source material. Good examples of the latter are Jean Sibelius’s *Turve kuu* (Hail, O Moon!) and *Venematka* (The Boat Journey), op. 18/2 and 18/3 respectively, both setting verse from the *Kalevala*. Yet another category of musical works based on Nordic epics and sagas is that of instrumental scores, which includes both pieces for solo instruments as well as those for chamber ensembles. Sibelius is the greatest exponent of this category as well, with his *Kalevala*-based *Kyllikki*, op. 41 (1904) being notable as one of the few solo piano works related to a Nordic epic or saga from any Nordic country. Named after Lemminkäinen’s wife from the *Kalevala*, Sibelius’s three-movement work is not based on any particular event or scene in the epic, but is simply meant as an impression of the character herself.

The majority of the remaining works based on Nordic epics and sagas that are neither orchestral nor orchestral with vocal parts drawn directly from the literature, are

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<sup>1</sup> John Horton, *Scandinavian Music: A Short History*, 1963 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975) 79.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Mulvad, Introduction to *Dania Sonans VII: Balders Død*, John Bergsagel, trans. (Copenhagen: Dansk Selskab for Musikforskning, 1980) 14.

also vocal in nature—whether accompanied or *a cappella*—but with original librettos that are merely inspired by the epics and sagas, rather than being direct quotations of them. Hartmann’s *Balders Død*, is such an example—the highly romanticized libretto by Ewald being largely the author’s own creation, though using themes taken from Snorri Sturluson’s literary work. Another example from Denmark is the cantata *Baldurs drøm* (Baldur’s Dream; 1857), by Danish composer Niels W. Gade (1817-90). This piece features a libretto by Adolph Hertz (1824-82) that was simply inspired by characters and events found in “Baldurs draumar” from the *Poetic Edda*, rather than actually quoting the work’s text.

The Norwegian master Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), meanwhile, wrote several works inspired by material from the *Heimskringla*—including the melodrama *Bergliot*, op. 42 (1871), from “Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar,” and the operatic fragments *Olav Trygvason*, op. 50 (1873), from “Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar”—all of which feature librettos by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. While working on *Olav Trygvason*, however, Bjørnson lost interest in the project, leaving Grieg with enough libretto for just three scenes. As a result, the exuberant cantata *Landkjenning*, op. 31 (Land-sighting; 1881)—scored for baritone, male chorus and orchestra—must be considered the finest of Grieg’s *Heimskringla*-based works. Concerning Olav Trygvason’s return to Norway after a voyage abroad, *Landkjenning* is undoubtedly the composer’s most successful choral work. Finally, also inspired by the *Heimskringla*, this time “Óláfs saga Helga,” is the oratorio *Heimferd* (1930) by Ludvig Irgens-Jensen (1894-1969). With a libretto by Olav Gullvåg (1885–1961), *Heimferd* was written to celebrate the life and deeds of the beloved Saint Olaf.

Despite the country's rich musical heritage, very few Swedish composers have based compositions on Nordic epics or sagas. This is no doubt partly due to the fact that Sweden does not have a native epic or saga, but rather draws from those of its Scandinavian neighbors. Nevertheless, there is at least one opera that deserves mention: *Arnljot* (1910) by Wilhelm Peterson-Berger (1867–1942). With a libretto by the composer, *Arnljot*—generally considered Sweden's national opera—concerns the historical legend of the warrior Arnljótt Gelline as found in “Óláfs saga Helga” (The Saga of St. Ólaf) from the *Heimskringla*. Though often referred to as a Swedish *Gesamtkunstwerk*, due to the composer's fondness for the music dramas of Richard Wagner, *Arnljot* relies more on traditional operatic structures, including arias and set pieces, rather than a Wagnerian structure, as well as a sparing use of leitmotifs.

The first opera inspired by the *Kalevala*, on the other hand, was *Pohjan neiti* (Maiden of the North; 1898) by Oskar Merikanto (1868–1924). With a libretto by Antti Rytkönen (1870–1930), *Pohjan neiti* was also the first opera written in the Finnish language, though it no longer remains in the active repertoire. *Aino* (1909), meanwhile, by Finnish composer Erkki Melartin (1875–1937), has been described by Pekka Hako as “the most systematic post-Wagnerian work in the history of Finnish opera” due to its inclusion of twenty-two leitmotifs presented initially in the work's overture, Wagnerian harmonies, and hints of Impressionism.<sup>3</sup> *Aino*, “the first masterpiece in Finnish opera,”<sup>4</sup> features a libretto by Jalmari Finne (1874–1938), inspired by the female character of the

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<sup>3</sup> Pekka Hako, *Finnish Opera* (Helsinki, Finland: Finnish Music Information Centre, 2002) 39.

<sup>4</sup> Hako, 41.

same name, as found in the Finnish national epic, whom Väinämöinen attempts to woo but instead drives to suicide.

Considerably more recent are the *Kalevala*-based operas of Einojuhani Rautavaara (b. 1928) and Aulis Sallinen (b. 1935). Rautavaara's *Runo 42: Sammon ryöstö* (Canto 42: The Myth of Sampo; 1974/82) and *Marjatta matala neiti* (Marjatta, Lowly Maiden; 1975) are both labeled by their composer as "choral operas"—the former being scored for male soloists, male choir, and tape, and the latter for soprano, flute, and female choir—though they are more along the lines of oratorio than opera. Though both contain quotations from the *Kalevala*, their librettos are just as much the creation of the composer. The two works are in thematic contrast to each other, with *Sammon ryöstö* illustrating Finland in pagan times and *Marjatta* depicting the arrival of Christianity to the nation. Sallinen's opera *Kullervo* (1988), meanwhile, has a libretto by the composer based on a play of the same title by Aleksis Kivi (1834-72), as well as the *Kalevala*. The colorful work, concerning one of the most tragic figures of the epic, is essentially tonal and contains aspects of both jazz and popular music.

From Iceland are two more recent works inspired by Nordic myth and legend, both of which have librettos by their respective composer based on the *Poetic Edda*. *Völuspá* (Song of the Sybil; 1974) is a cantata, based on the Eddic poem of the same name, by Jón Þórarinnsson (b. 1917). Scored for baritone, choir, and orchestra, the work's quasi-Germanic style reflects the influence of its composer's teacher, Paul Hindemith (1895-1963). Written the same year as *Völuspá* was the first full-scale Icelandic opera, *Þrymskviða*, op. 5 (The Lay of Thrym; 1974), by Jón Asgeirsson (b. 1928). For this five-act opera, Asgeirsson utilized the same type of vocal intonation believed to have been

used to recite the ancient Eddic poetry during the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> Both *Völuspá* and *Þrymskviða* were written to celebrate the 1100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Iceland's colonization.

Before proceeding to a discussion of Iceland's greatest composer, Jón Leifs, and his music, the remainder of this chapter will provide a broad overview of several of the more important Nordic works written during the last two hundred years—specifically orchestral scores and pieces for voice and orchestra—that are either based on, in the former case, or feature librettos directly drawn from, in the latter case, the *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Kalevala*, Icelandic Sagas, *Heimskringla*, or the *Gesta Danorum*. Not included in this category, however, due to their heavy reliance on their respective dramas, regardless of whether or not those dramas are based on Nordic myth or legend, are the many incidental music scores composed by Nordic composers, such as Grieg's *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, op. 22 (1872).

### Scandinavian Composers and Compositions

The Danish composer Johan Peter Emilius Hartmann (1805-1900), a leading musical figure of the Danish Golden Age (c.1820-1850), was perhaps the first Nordic composer to write orchestral music based on a Nordic epic or saga. While a few of his works of this type are incidental scores—including *Olaf den hellige*, op. 23 (Olaf the Holy; 1838), *Hakon Jarl*, op. 40 (Earl Hakon/Hákon Sigurtharson; 1844), and *Yrsa*, op. 78 (1883), all for plays by Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger (1779–1850), the former two based on the *Heimskringla* and the latter one on the *Gesta Danorum*—precluding them from discussion here, several others are ballets. Among these are two of his better-

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<sup>5</sup> John D. White, "New Music of Iceland" from *New Music of the Nordic Countries*, John D. White, ed. (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002) 325.

known dramatic scores, *Valkyrien* and *Thrymskviden*, both for choreographer August Bournonville (1805–79).

Hartmann had the longest and one of the most successful careers of any nineteenth-century Danish composer. Son of court violinist August Wilhelm Hartmann (1775–1850), from whom he received musical training and encouragement, and grandson of Johann Ernst Hartmann, J. P. E. Hartmann elected to pursue law and held a position in the Danish government for most of his life while actively pursuing music as a composer, performer, conductor, and teacher on the side. To this end, Hartmann's musical accomplishments include assisting in the foundation of Copenhagen's concert society, *Musikforeningen*; being an organist at the Copenhagen cathedral; and serving as a joint director of Copenhagen's music conservatory, the *Kjøbenhavns Musikkonservatorium*.

In his compositions, Hartmann succeeded in fostering a unique "Nordic" style of Romanticism independent of Germanic influences, drawn from native folk and medieval traditions, and darkly rich and subtle. Such a description is, no doubt, fairly arbitrary, if not meaningless; the music instead demands aural attention rather than adjectival portrayal. Nevertheless, his works and style were quite influential upon the young Grieg, who often spoke with admiration for the elder Hartmann. Further, in a review of his operatic masterpiece, *Liden Kirsten* (Little Kirsten; 1846), which features a libretto by Hans Christian Andersen (1805–75), the newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* printed, "The Nordic-Romantic spirit . . . sounds through Hartmann's melodies, [which] breathe the deep emotion and noble simplicity that are the fundamental feature of this music."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> From an 1846 review reprinted by Inger Sørensen in the liner notes to J. P. E. Hartmann, *Liden Kirsten* (Dacapo: 8.224106-07, 1999) 11–12.

Although Hartmann's fine oeuvre includes concert overtures, two symphonies, piano pieces, and vocal compositions, he found his greatest success in dramatic genres, most of which were collaborations with other great Danish Golden Age personalities. *Guldhornene*, op. 11 (The Golden Horns; 1832), one of his earliest works to meet with critical success, was also the first in which Hartmann's signature darkly-colored Nordic Romanticism is clearly apparent. Written to accompany a melodramatic reading of Oehlenschläger's poem, *Guldhornene* is highly evocative of the mysterious and primitive atmosphere, and action, of the narrative. The text concerns the discovery of the ancient *lurs*—primitive S-shaped bronze trumpets dating from the first millennium C. E.—and the mythological characters associated with them, all of which are represented by different motifs in Hartmann's score.

However, it was in yet another dramatic medium, ballet, that Hartmann incorporated material from the Nordic epics and sagas. Hartmann worked with the choreographer August Bournonville (1805–79) on several occasions, resulting in a number of such works, the most notable being *Valkyrien*, op. 62 (1861), though the later *Thrymskviden*, op. 67 (The Legend of Thrym; 1868) is certainly not without merit as well. The first of these collaborations is based on the “Skjöldunga saga” (Saga of the Shield Sons) from the seventh and eighth books of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, and includes such Nordic stock characters as Vikings, Greek warriors, Valkyries, mermaids, and dwarfs. In order to add more mythology, as well as a romantic element, to his ballet, Bournonville extended the original source material with that of his own creation, drawing elements from established Norse myth and legend.

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The basic plot of the ballet, as found in the *Gesta Danorum*, involves the aged Danish king Harald Hyldetand, also known as Harald Wartooth, and his desire to die a hero. However, due to his faithfulness to the god Odin, Harald has been given an invulnerability to iron, thus making it difficult for him to be killed in battle. Nevertheless, determined to die a glorious death, Harald challenges his nephew, Ring of Sweden, to a great battle. Known as the Battle of Bråvalla Heath, or Bråvik, this legendary conflict is perhaps the most famous of all those in the Nordic epics and sagas, appearing in several different sources. In the end, the Danes loosing, Harald beseeches Odin to grant them victory. Instead, the god answers by killing Harald himself with his mace. To this material, Bournonville added a love affair between Harald's grandson, Helge, and the Valkyrie Svava, as well as several scenes in Valhalla, the realm of Odin.

Hartmann's colorfully expressive score includes few folk elements, but instead conforms to the epic nature of Grammaticus's saga. Indeed, Hartmann composed some of his most exciting and most beautiful music for Bournonville's four-act ballet, including numerous dances, marches, atmospheric numbers, and battle pieces. Of particular note from the first act is the rousing "Dans af Valkyrier og Valhalla-Marsch" (Dance of the Valkyries and Valhalla March), in which the gods of the Nordic pantheon are first presented to the audience. The Introduction to the third act, meanwhile, contains a delicate chamber piece for flute, harp, and violin that is almost impressionistic in atmosphere. Hartmann's finest *Valkyrien* music, however, "Slaget på Bråvallahede" (The Battle of Bråvalla Heath), is found in Act Four. Used by the composer in the earlier *Olaf den hellige* and *Hakon Jarl* as well, this powerful six-minute piece is scored for full orchestra and includes numerous brass fanfares and timpani incursions.

Though slightly less important in J. P. E. Hartmann's career than *Valkyrien*, two of the composer's later scores deserve mention due to their strong connection to Nordic myth and legend. For the ballet *Thrymskviðen*, Bournonville consulted Oehlenschläger's epic poem *Nordens Guder* (The Gods of the North; 1819), which in turn was based on the *Poetic Edda*, particularly "Þrymskviða." "Þrymskviða," a comic Eddic poem, relates how the giant Thrym steals Thor's hammer in a vain attempt to woo Freyja as a bride. The best-known selection from Hartmann's score is the second act "Gudernes Triumphmarch" (Triumphal March of the Nordic Gods), in which the composer once again takes the opportunity, as he did in *Valkyrien*, to provide the Nordic pantheon with an entrance march. From a few years later is Hartmann's popular cantata *Völuspá*, op. 71 (1872), setting eight stanzas from "Völuspá" from the *Poetic Edda*. Scored for male choir and orchestra and in five dramatic movements, the cantata describes the fight between Æsir and the Giants and the formers' victory.

The next major Scandinavian composer to base an orchestral work on material from a Nordic epic or saga was Carl August Nielsen (1865-1931). Born in the afterglow of the Danish Golden Age, Nielsen acquired his earliest musical training and encouragement from his mother and father, both quite musically inclined themselves. He soon learned to play the violin, joined a local amateur orchestra, and spent several years as a cornettist in a military orchestra. Eventually, after a successful violin audition and approval from Niels Wilhelm Gade (1817-90), whose house the young Nielsen visited in 1883 with an early string quartet movement in hand, Nielsen attended the Copenhagen Conservatory, studying theory under Hartmann and history under Gade. After

graduating, he held a number of musical posts over the course of his career, including those of violinist, conductor, and music instructor.

Nielsen's style, especially in his mature compositions, can perhaps best be described as neo-Classical, though it is certainly of a highly individualized nature reflecting his fairly carefree personality. Notwithstanding that he succeeded in creating a personal musical style that reflects stereotypical Danish wit, humor, and good nature, Nielsen's music cannot really be considered nationalistic, nor is it particularly indicative of its Northern European origin. A key feature in many of his works is "progressive" or "emergent" tonality—not an abandonment of tonality, nor an attempt to create extra tension, but the practice of using one key as the genesis for a progression to a different key. As the scholar Robert Simpson writes in his study of the composer's works, "[Nielsen's] use of emergent tonality is a demonstration of personal mastery and of that truest kind of artistic courage that can risk saying new things in old terms. This dynamic view of tonality . . . is in any case characteristic of his own temperament, which cannot help looking outwards."<sup>7</sup>

Nielsen's orchestral output includes six symphonies which may be considered quite modern for their time: "Nielsen's symphonies are borne along by a powerful and dramatic internal driving-force, with rhythmically expansive melodies, free tonal or modal harmony and striking polyphonic effects. This music is resolute and expressive without ever indulging in pathos."<sup>8</sup> He did not particularly like program music, however,

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist* (New York: Taplinger, 1979) 184.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Jacoby, "A Survey of Art Music," from *Music in Denmark*, Knud Ketting, ed. (Copenhagen: Danish Cultural Institute, 1987) 34.

once stating that for music “to think thoughts, glow in colours, or speak in allusive metaphors is beyond its power[;] . . . still less is it capable of expressing an entire, long, coherent programme.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Nielsen did compose a few programmatic works, including the sunny overture *Helios*, op. 17 (1903), the Greek myth-based *Pan og Syrinx*, op. 49 (1918), and the travelogue *Rhapsodisk Ouverture: En Fantasirejse til Færøerne* (Rhapsody Overture: An Imaginary Journey to the Faroe Islands; 1927), which incorporates Faeroese folk music.

Only in a single orchestral work—the atmospheric tone poem *Saga-drøm*, op. 39 (Saga-dream, or The Dream of Gunnar; 1908)—however, did Nielsen turn to the rich mythology and legends of the Nordic epics and sagas for inspiration. *Saga-drøm* is based, essentially, on a single line from the Icelandic family saga “Njáls saga,” concerning the Viking warrior Gunnar Hamundarson from Hlidarendi. While on a voyage to Norway, Gunnar falls into a deep, but restless, sleep. His brother, Hjort, desires to wake him, but is stopped by his other brother, Kolskegg, with the admonition: “Don’t do that. . . . Let him finish his dream.”<sup>10</sup> The ensuing dream is quite nightmarish, prophesying a violent attack by ravenous wolves in which Hjort, Gunnar’s brother, is killed.

Nielsen’s score reveals no hint of the dream’s content, however, but is rather a lyrical depiction of the actual act of dreaming, inspired entirely by Kolskegg’s admonition. Almost more akin to Sibelius’s style than to that of Nielsen, *Saga-drøm* is a

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Nielsen, *Living Music*, Reginald Spink, trans. (London: Hutchinson, 1953) 33-37.

<sup>10</sup> *Njal’s Saga*, Robert Cook, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 2001) 104.

colorful and highly-evocative work, in no set form, built of fugal and chorale-like passages, and bears the tempo marking “Andante tranquillo.” Harmonically, the piece shifts between major and minor tonalities and emphasizes the interval of a fourth. “All the inner movement of this little work is contained within the outwardly static, poised world of dreams,” states Simpson. “At first hearing the work may sound somewhat baffling, even naive, but its still, spellbound poetry soon reveals itself.”<sup>11</sup>

As previously stated, very few Swedish composers have written works based on the Nordic epics and/or sagas. In fact, aside from Peterson-Berger’s *Arnlfjot*, the only notable Swedish work of this type is the Ninth Symphony of Kurt Magnus Atterberg (1887-1974). Generally considered one of his country’s greatest orchestral composers, Atterberg was primarily interested in the musical traditions of the past, tending to view Modern trends as anathema. The majority of his works are in Classical forms and are written in a national Romantic idiom, combining the style of Wagner and Strauss with that of Hugo Alfvén. Worth mentioning are his opulent Piano Concerto in B-flat minor, op. 37 (1935); the Orchestral Suite No. 3, op. 19/1 (1917) and Suite No. 5 “Suite barocco,” op. 23 (1923); the tone poem *Alven*, op. 33 (The River; 1929); and his ballet *De fävitiska jungfrurna*, op. 17 (The Foolish Virgins; 1920).

Atterberg’s nine symphonies are generally considered the epitome of twentieth-century Swedish work in the genre, with the Symphony No. 3 in D major “Västkostbilder,” op. 10 (West Coast Pictures; 1916), being a towering example of Nordic impressionism. In his subsequent Symphony No. 4 in G minor “Sinfonia

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<sup>11</sup> Simpson, 149-50.

piccola,” op. 14 (1918), Atterberg moved toward the authentic use of Swedish folk material by including several native songs and dances. Later, the composer achieved international fame for his award-winning Symphony No. 6 in C major, op. 31 (1928), in which he satirized several of Schubert’s melodies. In his Symphony No. 8 in E minor, op. 48 (1945), he again incorporated authentic native melodies, many of which he acquired from printed collections of Swedish folk music. It was with his final symphony, however, that Atterberg made exemplary use of Nordic myth and legend.

Scored for mezzo-soprano, baritone, choir, and orchestra, the Symphony No. 9 “Sinfonia visionaria,” op. 54 (1956) sets a libretto drawn directly from “Völuspá” in the *Poetic Edda*, though the composer rearranged much of the text for his purposes. Further, though labeled a symphony, *Sinfonia visionaria* is structured more along the lines of a cantata or oratorio, consisting of a brief orchestral introduction followed by twelve short vocal movements. From a stylistic standpoint, the work is perhaps Atterberg’s most unique score. The majority of *Sinfonia visionaria* is written in the late-Romantic vein, though the score also includes various modern idioms used as much for drama as for the composer’s personal statement concerning such idioms. For instance, he uses dodecaphonic techniques a number of times to depict the evil events spoken of by the text, but refers to the technique as “the seedbed of the disastrous change of fate in music.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, he quotes several leitmotifs from Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, including those of Siegfried and the ring itself.

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<sup>12</sup> Atterberg as quoted by Michael Kube, liner notes for *Atterberg: Symphony No. 9* (CPO: 999 913-2, 2003) 14.

Like Kurt Atterberg, as well as J. P. E. Hartmann, the twentieth-century Norwegian nationalist composer David Monrad Johansen (1888–1974) found inspiration for one of his finest scores in “Völuspá” from the *Poetic Edda*. Though Monrad Johansen’s musical idiom underwent several changes throughout his career, the influences of Grieg, neo-Classicism, and Modern French music were vital to his production, with native folklore and folk music also being important. He made strong use of Impressionism in many of his works, with Debussy’s influence being particularly notable: “Johansen did not try to imitate Debussy’s style by merely borrowing some superficial timbral effects. On the contrary, he seemed to be seeking the underlying structural principles.”<sup>13</sup> Among his most notable scores are *Nordlandsbilleder*, op. 5 (Scenes from Nordland; 1918), for piano; *Draumkvædet*, op. 7 (Dream Ballad; 1921), a folk ballad for male choir; the song cycle *Nordlands trompet*, op. 13 (1925), on verse by the Norwegian poet Petter Dass (1647–1707); and the tone poem *Pan*, op. 22 (1939).

Nationalistic elements and Impressionism come together in Monrad Johansen’s four-movement suite *Voluspá*, op. 15 (The Sibyl’s Prophecy; 1926) for soloists, chorus, and orchestra. The massive work, perhaps the greatest in the composer’s oeuvre, sets the entire text of the “Völuspá,” though in a *nynorsk* translation.<sup>14</sup> “In a series of mighty panoramas it depicts the entire world view of the old Nordic people from creation to the end of the world and its dream of a new earth to follow,” states Nils Grinde. “The music

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<sup>13</sup> Ståle Kleiberg, liner notes for *David Monrad Johansen* (Simax: PSC 3119, 1995) 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Nynorsk* is a national literary language, developed during the nineteenth century as *Landsmål* (“country speech”), based on native dialects, which is free of Danish influences.

is developed with great simplicity both in overall concept and in its details and well deserves the considerable popularity that it has enjoyed in Norway.”<sup>15</sup>

Around the same time as Jón Leifs was working on several of his epic- and saga-based compositions, Geirr Tveitt (1908-1981) wrote the most notable Norwegian orchestral score to be based on a Nordic myth or legend. Tveitt’s musical language combines folk music modality with the style of French Impressionism and, in his later works, a strong command of instrumental timbres. Such elements are particularly evident in his five large orchestral suites collectively grouped as *Hundrad hardingtonar*, op. 151 (A Hundred Hardanger Tunes; 1954–63), and later arranged for piano. He also wrote a number of works in which elements derived from Norwegian folk music come to play, including the G-Lydian tone poem *Prillar* (1931), his *slåtter*-based Piano Concerto No. 5, op. 156 (1954), and his two Hardanger Fiddle Concertos — No. 1, op. 163 (1956), and No. 2 “Tri fjordar,” op. 252 (Three Fjords; 1965).

Tveitt’s sole surviving contribution to the literature of orchestral music based upon Nordic epics and sagas include the *Solgud-symfonien* (*Tre stykke frå “Baldurs draumar”*), op. 81 (Sun God Symphony [Three Pieces from “Balder’s Dreams”]; 1958), based on his massive, though unrealized ballet *Baldurs draumar* (Balder’s Dreams; 1935). Though the majority of Tveitt’s life work was destroyed in a major fire at his home in 1970, the symphony’s score was restored in 1999 from surviving remnants by Norwegian composer Kaare Dyvik Husby (b. 1969). The three movements extracted from the unrealized and now lost third act of *Baldurs draumar* comprising the *Solgud-*

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<sup>15</sup> Nils Grinde, *A History of Norwegian Music*, William H. Halverson and Leland B. Sateren, trans. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) 309.

*symfonien* are “Gudane gløymmer mistelteinen” (The Gods Forget the Mistletoe), “Baldurs bálferd” (Baldur’s Bonfire Journey), and “Dansen i pileregnet” (Arrow-Dance).

*Baldurs draumar*, and by extension *Solgud-symfonien*, is based on the verse episode “Baldrs draumar” from the *Poetic Edda* in which Odin travels to hell in order to question a dead sibyl about the troubling dreams of his son, Baldr, as well as Snorri’s depiction of Baldr’s death in “Gylfaginning” from the *Prose Edda*. In the latter literary work, as depicted in the first movement of the symphony, Frigg, Baldr’s mother, upon learning of her son’s fate from Odin, has all things in the world swear an oath that they will never harm Baldr. She overlooks mistletoe, however, as she feels it is too young to make such an oath. This is a fatal mistake for Baldr as during a celebration of his invulnerability, depicted in the third movement, in which everyone present is shooting arrows at him with the belief that he cannot be hurt, Loki tricks a blind man into shooting an arrow made of mistletoe at Baldr. Needless to say, Baldr is killed, with the second movement depicting his burial at sea via a burning ship.

Tveitt’s *Solgud-symfonien* is in his mature style, being quite polished and balanced, and even somewhat Impressionistic. The first movement, “Gudane gløymmer mistelteinen,” is as lyrical as it is powerful, featuring a number of brass and woodwind solos hovering over frail accompaniments, depicting the oaths of various objects, alternating with short bursts from the full orchestra. The second and third movements, meanwhile, occur in reverse order of the literary action for the sake of the symphony’s musical integrity. The slower “Baldurs bálferd” opens with a chorale for brass and percussion, resplendent with horn and trumpet fanfares, that surges to a wild fire dance before fading into silence, depicting Baldr’s engulfed funeral barge as it disappears into

the distance. The fast-paced and highly-colorful “Dansen i pileregnet” is the most progressive of the three movements—featuring bitonality, harmonic shifts, and the use of pentatonic and whole-tone scales—while being rather reminiscent of Maurice Ravel’s *Bolero* (1928), as the celebrants hurl their various arrows at Baldr.

### Finnish Composers and Compositions

Since its appearance in the mid-nineteenth century, the *Kalevala* has served as the literary basis for more Nordic art music compositions than perhaps any other Nordic epic or saga. Interestingly enough, however, the *Kalevala* is also perhaps the most uniquely nationalistic of all such works, essentially belonging exclusively to the Finnish people rather than the Nordic population as a whole. As a result, the vast majority of art music compositions based on the *Kalevala* have been written by Finnish composers. By the same token, very few Finnish composers have based works on any Nordic epic or saga save the *Kalevala* since its initial publication in 1835. Further, the *Kalevala*’s infiltration of every aspect of Finnish culture—political, philosophical, and artistic—eventually led to a large body of Nordic art music compositions based on the Finnish national epic:

In Finland the publication of the *Kalevala* . . . marked a decisive impetus towards the search for all that was inherently Finnish in practically all the arts. The line dividing the beginnings of art music from folk music was in Finland particularly marked, and many years were to pass before the language of music itself became capable of absorbing elements of the *Kalevala* folk song, and it was possible to speak of a *Kalevala* style in music. . . . The 200 or more works composed on the basis of the *Kalevala* are a clear indication that the *Kalevala* is in Finland an integral part of the history not only of literature but of music too, constituting a thread that runs right through the Finnish musical tradition.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Eero Tarasti, “The *Kalevala* in Finnish Music,” from *Finnish Music Quarterly* (Issue 1-2 1985) 12/18.

Two of the earliest purely orchestral works based on the *Kalevala* are largely in the nineteenth-century Germanic art music tradition. Though neither of these works remain in the repertoire today, they at least helped forge the way for future *Kalevala*-inspired compositions, particularly those of Sibelius. Both pieces are based on the epic's "Kullervo cycle," Cantos Thirty-one to Thirty-six—a tragic story about a young man who seduces a maiden in the woods only to discover that she is his long-lost sister; her killing herself; and his going to war, finally committing suicide as well. The first known work to be based on the *Kalevala*, *Kullervo-alkusoitto* (Kullervo Overture; 1860), was written by Johan Filip von Schantz (1835–65), and is stylistically akin to Beethoven. Though he did not write any other compositions of merit, aside from a few very minor vocal works, Schantz is also remembered today for his stint as conductor of the Helsinki theatre orchestra during the 1860's.

The second notable work to be based on the *Kalevala*, *Kullervon kuolema* (The Death of Kullervo; 1880), was written by the conductor Robert Kajanus (1856–1933). Much more important, however, is his later tone poem, *Aino* (1885), which includes a very brief closing section for male chorus. The bulk of the score, however, is purely orchestral, hence its discussion here. *Aino*, like Kajanus's earlier *Kullervon kuolema*, is quite Wagnerian in style, featuring chromatic harmonies and lush orchestration. In addition to being named after one of the most important female characters in the epic, *Aino* gives praise to Finland's principal folk instrument, the five-stringed *kantele*, through its prominent harp solo and anonymous text. Though Kajanus left his greatest mark on Nordic music's development as the founder and leader of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, and as the first major advocate of Sibelius's orchestral work, his few extant

compositions, especially *Aino*, were quite important to the development of Finnish art music.

The use of the *Kalevala* as the basis for art music reached an early peak, however, with the national epic receiving its greatest musical treatment by Finland's most renowned art music composer, Jean Christian Julius Sibelius (1864-1957). Further, the music of Sibelius, probably more than that of any other Northern European composer, has earned the description of being genuinely "Nordic," though perhaps the composer's own favorable portrayal of his music as "pure spring water" is more useful. His style is often cool and brooding, not to the point of austerity, but reflective of the Nordic environment in which he lived and worked. Yet the sweeping grandeur and rich coloration of his music, appearing at times like rays of sunshine through dark clouds, is also undeniable. At many points in his music, the mood turns almost toward joviality, but not without seriousness close at hand.

In some of his finest works, Sibelius is proven to be a staunch nationalist through his use of *Kalevala* themes and devices. Authentic folk music, however, rarely makes an appearance. Instead, the bold material crucial to so many of his works, including those based on the *Kalevala*, appears to grow almost organically from previously heard motifs and elements. This is especially true in his seven numbered symphonies, particularly Symphony No. 7 in C major, op. 105 (1924), as well as his later tone poems. As Aaron Copland writes, "Sibelius' movements . . . depend more on the gradual organic growth of one theme evolving into another rather than the contrast of one theme with another. At its best, the music seems to flower, often from unpromising beginnings."

Born into a Swedish-speaking family, Sibelius displayed musical ability early in life, learned to play the violin, and penned his first musical work at the age of ten. After studying law at the University of Helsinki, and composition with Martin Wegelius (1846-1906) at the newly established Helsinki Music Institute, he pursued music studies for a time in Berlin. It was in this city, after attending a performance of Robert Kajanus's aforementioned tone poem *Aino* in 1890, that Sibelius found the necessary inspiration to become a truly great composer. Kajanus's work sparked a strong curiosity in the young Sibelius for the *Kalevala*—a monumentally important interest that served as inspiration for many of his finest works:

To say that the *Kalevala* struck a responsive chord in Sibelius's sensibility would be an understatement: it was of crucial importance to the growth of his artistic personality. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that without the *Kalevala*, Sibelius would no more be Sibelius than he would be without the natural landscape of the North. It affected him far more profoundly than it did any other Finnish composer.<sup>17</sup>

Following the Kajanus concert, Sibelius told a friend about all “of the wonderful opportunities the *Kalevala* offered for musical expression.” A letter to his fiancée Aino Järnefelt from that same year offers further insight into the excitement Sibelius felt for the epic: “I am reading my *Kalevala* diligently, and I feel I already understand Finnish so much better. . . . It reads like pure music, theme and variation.”<sup>18</sup> Within two years, Sibelius wrote what was not only his first *Kalevala*-based work, but the first work to earn him international acclaim, the program symphony *Kullervo*. Over the course of the next

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Layton, *Sibelius* (New York: Schirmer, 1993) 144.

<sup>18</sup> William A. Wilson, “Sibelius, the *Kalevala*, and Karelianism,” from *The Sibelius Companion*, Glenda Dawn Goss, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996) 53. An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT.

thirty-five years, he wrote a number of additional orchestral works based on the Finnish national epic, the most important being the tone poem cycle, or program symphony, *Lemminkäis-sarja*, and the single tone-poems *Pohjolan tytär* and *Tapiola*:

From the performance of his first major work, the *Kullervo* Symphony, in 1892 to the completion of his last major effort, *Tapiola*, in 1926, Sibelius, motivated in part by the ideals of his Young Finland compatriots and by his own love for and pride in his country, returned to the *Kalevala* again and again for subject matter for many of his compositions.<sup>19</sup>

*Kullervo*, op. 7 (1892) is a large work in five movements, each of which bears a programmatic title—the first, second, and fourth movements being instrumental, with the third and fifth movements being settings of text taken directly from the *Kalevala*. Though the work is perhaps best called a “program symphony” due to its structure and length, but has also at times been labeled a “cantata,” Sibelius was hesitant to refer to it as either, instead calling it a “symphonic poem for soloists, chorus and orchestra.” However, Robert Layton believes that *Kullervo* is as much a symphony as Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2 in C minor “Resurrection” (1894/1910): “it embraces concepts that, strictly speaking, lie outside the range of the normal classical symphony, though without sacrificing its essentially organic modes of procedure.”<sup>20</sup>

*Kullervo*, like the works of Schantz and Kajanus, is based on the *Kalevala*'s “Kullervo cycle” and is somewhat Wagnerian in style. Though more impressionistic than narrative, Sibelius's program symphony is significant musically as it contains his largest use of Finnish folk music elements. In fact, according to Lisa de Gorog, Sibelius makes

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<sup>19</sup> Wilson, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Layton, 148.

greater use of folk elements in *Kullervo* than most of the Russian nationalists do in their music, particularly as concerns his use of modality,<sup>21</sup> the bulk of the work being in the Dorian mode. However, though Sibelius does not directly quote any of the authentic Finnish folk tunes with which he was familiar at the time, many of the themes in *Kullervo* are based on the style of the actual folk tunes he had recently heard performed by the legendary rune singer Larin Paraske (1833-1904): "This made the Finns realize that they were dealing with a work of art which, for the first time in Finnish music, expressed something of the essence of folk music."<sup>22</sup>

The first, second, and fourth movements of *Kullervo* structurally resemble the first three movements of a standard symphony, being in sonata form, a rondo, and a scherzo respectively, while the two choral movements follow no standard pattern. The first movement, "Johdanto" (Introduction), is rather Brucknerian in its grandeur and musical sweep, setting the mood for the remainder of the powerful symphony. It is not based on any specific event in Kullervo's tragic life, however, but rather "paints a general picture of him in broad brushstrokes without dwelling on any dramatic details." The second movement, "Kullervon nuoruus" (Kullervo's Youth), on the other hand, musically depicts events of the hero's childhood. Related to the composer's description of it "as a lullaby with variations which increase in emotional intensity," the movement is overall rather somber and foreboding.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Lisa de Gorog, *From Sibelius to Sallinen* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1989) 83.

<sup>22</sup> de Gorog, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Erik Tawaststjerna, *Sibelius: Volume I—1865-1905*, Robert Layton, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 110 and 112.

The third movement, “Kullervo ja hänen sisarensa” (Kullervo and his Sister), sets verse from the epic’s thirty-fifth canto. Structured in two scenes with an orchestral interlude, it is certainly the most dramatic, as well as the longest, movement of *Kullervo*. In addition to orchestra, it is scored for baritone, soprano, and chorus, representing Kullervo, his sister, and the impartial narrator respectively. In the first scene, which follows a short dance-like orchestral introduction, Kullervo and his sister meet and he entices her into his sleigh. A wildly passionate orchestral interlude—representing the “[sexual] encounter between two primitives who experience all-powerful sensations and feelings on their eventful journey over snow-covered wastes”<sup>24</sup>—separates the first and second scene. In the latter, immediately after the incest is revealed, Kullervo’s sister sings a suicidal lament, followed in turn by Kullervo’s own sorrowful song, before throwing herself into the whirling rapids.

“Kullervon sotaanlähtö” (Kullervo Goes to War), the fourth movement, resembles a Karelian folk dance as it “depicts Kullervo going forth into battle and gives us a picture, both colorful and vivid, of his proud and arrogant bearing.”<sup>25</sup> As might be expected, the movement also contains elements of martial battle music, though it is almost jovial in mood and certainly less weighty than the work’s finale. “Kullervon kuolema” (Kullervo’s Death), the fifth movement of *Kullervo*, sets verse from the *Kalevala*’s thirty-sixth canto, but is this time only scored for orchestra and chorus, the latter again being completely narrative and objective. The movement’s text relates how Kullervo, having

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<sup>24</sup> Tawaststjerna, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Tawaststjerna, 117.

been given an enchanted sword by the god Ukko, makes his way into the desolate countryside to the spot where he seduced his sister and commits suicide by throwing himself upon it. Following its mysterious introduction, “Kullervon kuolema” contains a number of themes from the previous four movements, especially the first, closing with the same powerful “Kullervo” theme that opens the symphony.

While *Kullervo* was instrumental in establishing Sibelius’s career as a master composer, *Lemminkäis-sarja*, op. 22 (Lemminkäinen Suite; 1895/1939) has been one of the works instrumental in preserving that career—especially the second tone poem of the set, *Tuonelan joutsen* (The Swan of Tuonela). Known by several different titles, including *Lemminkäis-sarja* (Lemminkäinen Suite), *Lemminkäinen legendaa* (Lemminkäinen Legends), or *Neljä Legendaa* (Four Legends)—Sibelius’s full original (1895) title being *Sinfonisia runoelmia (Aihe Lemminkäisen tarusta)* (Symphonic Poems on Motifs from the Lemminkäinen Myth)—this work is actually a set of four tone poems, or a tone-poem cycle, more than it is a symphony or suite. Named for its subject, *Lemminkäis-sarja* is a purely instrumental work and focuses on the first “Lemminkäinen cycle” (Cantos Eleven to Fifteen) of the *Kalevala*. Nevertheless, none of the poems that comprise *Lemminkäis-sarja* follow an exact literary program, but instead evoke the general atmosphere of the *Kalevala*’s narrative.<sup>26</sup>

The opening tone poem, *Lemminkäinen ja saaren neidot* (Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of the Islands), paints the picture of the young man leaving home in order to find a bride on the Island of Saari, doing so in Kyllikki. However, he soon tires of her

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<sup>26</sup> Tawaststjerna, 168.

and decides to instead seek the hand of Pohjola's daughter, which can only be won through the accomplishment of an impossible task—killing the swan of Tuoni (Death). Musically, the mood evoked by this opening tone poem is perhaps best described as “mysterious,” with the hero's romantic pursuits depicted by a dance-like theme. Substantially more atmospheric, however, is the famous second tone poem, *Tuonelan joutsen*, which musically paints Tuoni's swan as it floats effortlessly upon the dark river that encircles Tuonela (the Underworld). In the key of A minor, *Tuonelan joutsen*—once described as Sibelius's “first incontestable masterpiece”<sup>27</sup>—features a solo *cor anglais* over a bleak, shimmering orchestral accompaniment, representing the swan and river respectively.

The dark and hopeless impression of Tuonela itself is depicted in the cycle's third tone poem, *Lemminkäinen Tuonelassa* (Lemminkäinen in Tuonela). Here, in the abode of the dead, Lemminkäinen is pursued by angry spirits for his attempted killing of Tuoni's swan. Sibelius depicts the scene via menacing themes in the lower strings, intense cries in the winds, and the use of tritones. *Lemminkäinen Tuonelassa* ends much more subdued than it began, however, as Lemminkäinen is rescued from Tuonela by the love of his mother. *Lemminkäis-sarja* closes with its fourth tone poem, *Lemminkäisen paluu* (Lemminkäinen's Return, or Lemminkäinen's Homeward Journey), built upon a three-note motive, in which the hero is brought back to life by Ilmarinen and his mother. Of *Lemminkäisen paluu*, Sibelius stated, “I think we Finns ought not to be ashamed to

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<sup>27</sup> Guy Rickards, *Jean Sibelius* (London: Phaidon, 1997) 58.

show more pride in ourselves. . . . That is the underlying sentiment throughout ‘Lemminkäinen’s Homeward Journey’.”<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the large-scale scores *Kullervo* and *Lemminkäis-sarja*, Jean Sibelius wrote several other works based on the *Kalevala*, including the tone poem *Luonnotar*, op. 70 (1913), featuring solo soprano, the cantata *Tulen synty*, op. 32 (The Origin of Fire; 1902/10), and the cantata *Väinön virsi*, op. 110 (Väinö’s Song; 1926), setting verse from the first, forty-seventh, and forty-third cantos respectively. More important, however, are his two purely orchestral tone poems based on the *Kalevala*: *Pohjolan tytär* and *Tapiola*. The first of these, *Pohjolan tytär*, op. 49 (Pohjola’s Daughter; 1906), labeled a “symphonic fantasia” by the composer, is concerned with the events of the epic’s eighth canto, in which Väinämöinen attempts to woo the daughter of Pohjola through the accomplishment of several impossible tasks. The work is generally considered the most programmatic of Sibelius’s tone poems, as it provides narrative instead of merely evoking mood and atmosphere like many of his other programmatic works.

*Pohjolan tytär* is structured in a loose sonata form and includes thematic transformation, the extensive use of modulations, including those to distant keys, and the regular appearance of tritones. The action of the poetry—including such impossible tasks as splitting a horsehair with a pointless knife, pulling an egg into a knot so that the knot does not show, peeling a stone, and cutting fence poles out of ice without breaking off a chip—meanwhile, is brilliantly depicted through Sibelius’s use of soaring melodies and a variety of instrumental timbres. Of this masterpiece and the composer’s skills, the

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<sup>28</sup> Sibelius as quoted by Tawaststjerna, 175.

renowned Sibelius scholar Erik Tawaststjerna states, “In a sense *Pohjola’s Daughter* is drawn towards two magnetic poles: Strauss in the west, and Rimsky-Korsakov in the east. . . . But at a deeper level, it is the remarkable inventiveness in [Sibelius’s] handling of thematic metamorphosis and his mastery of the poetic as well as the symphonic that makes *Pohjola’s Daughter* so impressive an achievement.”<sup>29</sup>

It is fitting that a discussion of Sibelius’s *Kalevala*-based works should end with the final piece he composed on the subject and the last of his major works—*Tapiola*, op. 112 (1926). Of *Tapiola*, the English critic Cecil Gray wrote, “No mere words can hope to convey one tithe of the grandeur and sublimity, the sheer originality and imaginative power, which inform the whole work both in broadest outline and in the minutest details of the scoring. Even if Sibelius had written nothing else, this one work would entitle him to a place among the greatest masters of all time.”<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Walter Damorsch, who had commissioned and premiered *Tapiola* with the New York Philharmonic, had great admiration for the work, stating in a letter to the composer:

I consider *Tapiola* to be one of the most original and fascinating works from your pen. The variety of expression that you give to the one theme in the various episodes, the closely-knit musical structure, the highly original orchestration, and, above all, the poetic imagery of the entire work, are truly marvelous. No one but a Norseman could have written this work. We were all enthralled by the dark pine forests and the shadowy gods and wood-nymphs who dwell therein. The coda with its icy winds sweeping through the forest made us shiver.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Erik Tawaststjerna, *Sibelius: Volume II—1904-1914*, Robert Layton, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 60.

<sup>30</sup> Layton, 111.

<sup>31</sup> Erik Tawaststjerna, *Sibelius: Volume III—1914-1957*, Robert Layton, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) 275.

At its essence, *Tapiola* is a massive monothematic work in which broad strokes of color and emotion musically portray the mysteriously foreboding atmosphere of the Finnish forests. Further, it is in this tone poem, more than any other, that Sibelius's "organic" growth technique can best be observed, with the work's opening B-minor theme serving as the source for nearly all the work's subsequent musical material. Unlike all of Sibelius's previous *Kalevala*-based orchestral works, however, the impetus for *Tapiola* is not found in a specific canto of the epic. Instead, *Tapiola*—named for the Finnish forest god Tapio—merely provides a musical painting of the Finnish forests in which so much of the *Kalevala*'s narrative is set. "[Its] world is new and unexplored, a world of strange new sounds, a landscape that no tone-poem has painted with such inner conviction and complete sympathy," states Robert Layton, "Nowhere, except possibly in Debussy's *La mer* and 'Nuages,' is the feeling for nature so intense as to amount to complete identification."<sup>32</sup>

Following Jean Sibelius's extremely adept handling of the *Kalevala* in his orchestral output, many Finnish composers understandably shied away from writing works based on their national epic, as well as large-scale orchestral works in general, including symphonies. Nevertheless, during his own lifetime, Sibelius was just one of several active Finnish art music composers who played an important role during the country's musical transition from the Romantic Era to the Modern Era. Of the other Finnish composers who dared to write *Kalevala*-based orchestral works, three—two of

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<sup>32</sup> Layton, 111.

which wrote their works in question during the height of Sibelius's musical potency and popularity—deserve mentioning here: Leevi Madetoja, Aarre Merikanto, and Uuno Klami.

Despite his relatively small orchestral output, Leevi Madetoja (1887–1947) is often considered the greatest Finnish composer working in the medium after Sibelius. Some of Madetoja's first musical experiences involved a *kantele* he received as a boy, making an indelible impression on his early artistic development. Later instruction at the University of Helsinki; trips abroad to Paris, Vienna, and Berlin; brief periods of study with D'Indy and Fuchs; and a friendship with Robert Kajanus all but completed his musical training. Perhaps most significant, however, was the on-going encouragement he received from Sibelius, the latter feeling more closely connected to Madetoja than to his other pupils. Nevertheless, Madetoja was not as progressive a composer as his mentor, preferring to compose in the national Romantic style rather than the modern idioms.

However, like Sibelius, Madetoja had a fine understanding of the orchestra, its abilities, and its limitations. As Kimmo Korhonen writes, "the orchestra can be considered his best instrument, the channel of expression that came most naturally to him. Madetoja's orchestral music is not startlingly vivid or original, but everything works: everything seems natural and there is nothing unnecessary."<sup>33</sup> Madetoja's first major orchestral score, as well as his only *Kalevala*-inspired work—the vigorous tone poem *Kullervo*, op. 15 (1913)—proves this statement. Containing a mixture of pathos and lyricism, reminiscent of Tchaikovsky, this freely structured piece is based on the

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<sup>33</sup> Kimmo Korhonen, liner notes for *Meet the Composer: Leevi Madetoja* (Finlandia: 4509-99967-2, 1996) 4.

same literary material as Schantz's *Kullervo-alkusoitto* and Sibelius's *Kullervo*. Aside from its recurring opening theme, however, the most unique and modern aspect of Madetoja's *Kullervo* is the fact that it opens in one key (B minor), but concludes in another (E minor).

On the other hand, much is owed by Modern Finnish music to the influential composer Aarre Merikanto (1893–1958), son of the aforementioned Oskar Merikanto. Like his contemporaries Ernest Pingoud (1887–1942) and Väinö Raitio (1891–1945)—the latter of which wrote two fairly unknown *Kalevala*-based orchestral works, *Lemminkäisen äiti* (Lemminkäinen's Mother; 1934) and *Neiet niemen nenissä* (Maidens of the Headland; 1935)—Aarre Merikanto was significantly impacted by the music of Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915), as well as numerous other Modern composers. His works from the early decades of the twentieth century show a variety of influences, from impressionism, to expressionism, to neo-Classicism, with lyricism always playing a crucial role. Disappointed by the negative reception of his Modern works, however, Merikanto turned towards national Romanticism for such later compositions as his *Kalevala*-based *Kyllikin ryöstö* (The Rape of Kyllikki; 1935).

Based on the Finnish epic's first "Lemminkäinen cycle," particularly the eleventh canto in which Lemminkäinen abducts Kyllikki to be his wife, *Kyllikin ryöstö* is a fairly insignificant four-movement orchestral suite—aside from its highly chromatic third movement—featuring various folkdance rhythms. Considerably more notable is Merikanto's earlier tone poem, *Lemminkäinen*, op. 10 (1916). Like *Kyllikin ryöstö*, as well as Sibelius's *Lemminkäis-sarja*, Merikanto's tone poem is also based on Lemminkäinen's adventures on earth and in Tuonela, as stated in the *Kalevala*.

Thematically, *Lemminkäinen* is built of two musical ideas—one agitated, suggesting the hero's adventures, and the other lyrical, suggesting his romantic nature—while stylistically, the score mixes a number of modern elements, but is overall rather Impressionistic, suggesting Scriabin's influence.

Perhaps the most renowned Finnish composer after Jean Sibelius to make use of the *Kalevala* in his orchestral compositions is Uuno Klami (1900-1961). Klami's position is somewhat unique in the pantheon of twentieth-century Finnish composers, for unlike so many of his contemporaries, Klami chose tonality over atonality and the established over the progressive, securing a position of popularity in Finland just behind Sibelius. Ironically, perhaps, the bulk of Klami's oeuvre—immediately striking for its brilliant orchestration and warm vibrant color—is far removed both stylistically and emotionally from the “pure spring water” of his elder countryman. As Helena Tyrväinen asserts, “Instead of the ‘profound logic’ of Sibelius’s symphonies Klami proposed rhapsody and exoticism. . . . [H]is radicalism was aimed more at the aesthetic and philosophical basis of composition than at the tonal system. However modern his music sounded, it never completely abandoned the feeling of tonality.”<sup>34</sup>

Klami's notable early works are in a style that drew extensively on his strong admiration for Maurice Ravel, with elements of French impressionism, Spanish exoticism, and American jazz appearing in such pieces as his *Sérénades espagnoles* (Spanish Serenades; 1924). Although impressionism always remained a hallmark of Klami's style, the influence of the “Russian-period” works of Igor Stravinsky (1882-

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<sup>34</sup> Helena Tyrväinen, “The Success Story of the Man Who Forged the Sampo” from Finnish Music Quarterly (2/2000) 5–7.

1971) and his newfound interest in Finnish nationalism soon led Klami to gather inspiration from native folk material. In his first major work in this new idiom, the *Karjalainen rapsodia*, op. 15 (Karelian Rhapsody; 1927), the composer incorporated Karelian folk music, creating what still remains as one of his most popular pieces. For what are perhaps his greatest works, however, Klami turned to Sibelius's example, basing a number of compositions on the *Kalevala*, while also stating, "Conscious of the dangers involved in exploring territory where Sibelius reigned supreme, and realizing that many previous efforts in that area had resulted in grey and uninteresting music, I took a wholly different approach."<sup>35</sup>

The composer's indisputable masterpiece on such nationalistic material is his *Kalevala-sarja*, op. 23 (Kalevala Suite; 1932), originally consisting of the four movements "Maan synty" (The Creation of the Earth), "Kevään oras" (The Sprout of Spring), "Kehtolaulu Lemminkäiselle" (Cradle Song for Lemminkäinen), and "Sammon taonta" (The Forging of the Sampo), with the middle movement "Terhenniemi" added to the work's 1943 revision. In reference to this work, Klami stated, "I tried here, as in my other works, to avoid as far as possible the heaviness and profound melancholy for which Finnish music has been heavily criticized, particularly abroad."<sup>36</sup> The first, second, fourth, and fifth movements of Klami's *Kalevala-sarja* are each based on a different canto from the *Kalevala*—the first, second, fifteenth, and tenth respectively—while the third is merely intended as an evocation of Finnish nature. Overall, the score features

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<sup>35</sup> Korhonen, *Inventing Finnish Music*, 67.

<sup>36</sup> Klami as quoted in Tyrväinen, 8.

primitive rhythms and rich orchestral timbres, recalling the ballets of Stravinsky, with Korhonen even going so far as to refer to it as a “Finnish *Sacre*.”<sup>37</sup>

From additional material which Klami originally intended to include in *Kalevala-sarja*, but later withdrew due to its growing length, he constructed the tone poem *Lemminkäisen seikkailut saaressa* (The Adventures of Lemminkäinen on the Island of Saari; 1934). As a result, the independent score—based on the same material as Sibelius’s *Lemminkäinen ja saaren neidot*, Canto Eleven of the *Kalevala*—is quite similar in style to *Kalevala-sarja*. Klami wrote two additional *Kalevala*-based works as well, the cantata *Vipusessa käynti* (In the Belly of Vinpunen; 1938), featuring a libretto drawn from the epic’s seventeenth canto, and the incomplete ballet *Pyörteitä* (Whirls; 1957-61). The former piece, scored for baritone, male choir, and orchestra, relates how Väinämöinen jumped down the throat of the giant Vinpunen in order to coerce him into revealing his words of wisdom. Musically, *Vipusessa käynti* comes closer to the style of Sibelius than do perhaps any other of Klami’s works.

Of a markedly different nature from Klami’s music is the strikingly avant-garde output of Finnish composer Erik Bergman (b. 1911). Throughout his long career, Bergman has composed in nearly every modern musical style, producing a large number of works in a large number of genres, while finding inspiration for some of his finest compositions in the music, cultures, and religions of Northern Africa and the Orient. Among his most significant works is the percussive microtonal *Rubaiyat*, op. 41 (1953), for male choir and orchestra; the first major Finnish twelve-tone composition, *Kolme*

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<sup>37</sup> Kimmo Korhonen, *Inventing Finnish Music: Contemporary Composers from Medieval to Modern* (Helsinki: Finnish Music Information Center, 2003) 66.

*fantasiaa*, op. 42 (Three Fantasias; 1954), for clarinet and piano; the aleatoric orchestral work *Colori ed improvvisazioni*, op. 72 (1973); the folksong-based *Lapponia*, op. 76 (1975), for textless soloists and choir; and the cyclic opera *Det sjungande trädet*, op. 110 (The Singing Tree; 1989).

One of the most recent works based on the *Kalevala* is Bergman's dramatic *a cappella* cantata *Lemminkäinen*, op. 103 (1984). Scored for speaker, mezzo-soprano, baritone, and mixed choir—representing the narrator, Lemminkäinen's mother, Lemminkäinen, and the men of Pohjola respectively—*Lemminkäinen* is divided into two distinct scenes. The first scene draws its text from the epic's first Lemminkäinen cycle (Cantos 11-15), the same material on which Sibelius based his *Lemminkäis-sarja*. The second scene's text is derived from the epic's second Lemminkäinen cycle (Cantos 26-30), in which the title character, angry at not being invited to Ilmarinen's wedding, arrives at Pohjola to seek revenge and ends up fighting a band of Pohjola's men. Bergman employed a variety of vocal techniques, both primitive and modern, in *Lemminkäinen*, including traditional rune singing, *Sprechgesang*, whispering, heavy vibrato, homophony, polyphony, and glissando.

### **Icelandic Composers and Compositions**

Aside from several masterworks by Jón Leifs, which will be discussed over the course of the next three chapters, few notable art music scores based on the Nordic epics or sagas have been written by Icelandic composers until recently. This may be due to the fact that Leifs, who was a major advocate of basing Icelandic art music compositions on Norse literature, did not begin to receive due recognition until several years after his death. As a result, his ideas of a "Nordic Renaissance," first forwarded in Germany

during the rise of the Third Reich, were not immediately embraced by the Icelandic musical establishment. Since the 1970's, however, a number of Icelandic compositions have been written that are based on Nordic myths and legends, including the two previously mentioned works *Völuspá* and *Þrymskviða*, by Jón Þórarinnsson and Jón Asgeirsson respectively.

One of the most recent Icelandic works to be based on a Nordic epic or saga is the "semi-opera" *Fjórði söngur Guðrúnar* (Guðrún's Fourth Song; 1996), by Haukur Tómasson (b. 1960), with a libretto derived piecemeal from various poems found in the *Poetic Edda*. Tómasson has achieved great notoriety with such scores as *Spirall* (1992) for chamber ensemble and the orchestral work *Strati* (1993), both of which employ a chain-like chord progression technique which he adapted for use in *Fjórði söngur Guðrúnar*. Scored for three sopranos, two mezzos, an alto, a tenor, a bass-baritone, male choir, and chamber ensemble, this abstract score's music is often rather sparse, frequently harsh, yet strikingly colorful and expressive, and at times almost reminiscent of native folk music. *Fjórði söngur Guðrúnar* recounts the tragic life of the Icelandic heroine Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, including the murder of her first husband, the violent loss of all those she loves, and her own subsequent slaying and cannibalization of her two young sons.

## CHAPTER 5

### JÓN LEIFS IN NORDIC MUSIC HISTORY

In discussing Nordic art music, the names Edvard Grieg, Jean Sibelius, and Carl Nielsen are inevitably put forth as representative master composers in Norway, Finland, and Denmark respectively. To this may be added Hugo Alfvén (1872-1960) in Sweden, though perhaps with less general consensus. When it comes to Icelandic art music, however, there is no doubt that Jón Leifs (1899-1968)—who resolved early in his career to forge a new style of Icelandic art music based on native folk materials—stands as his country's most hallowed representative composer. The following chapter provides a basic biography of the composer's life, followed by a general overview of his contributions to Nordic art music history.

#### **Jón Leifs: The Man**

Although born in northern Iceland on May 1, 1899, Jón Leifs spent his childhood and most of his teenage years in Reykjavík. Though he came from a cultured family, in which music was appreciated, the Icelandic capital had little to offer Leifs in the way of music education at the time. His earliest musical experiences, therefore, consisted mainly of private piano lessons and the occasional public recital, the latter at which he performed works by such composers as Beethoven and Grieg. He also wrote his first notable, albeit brief, piano work in 1913, *Vökudraumur* (*Hugleiðing* [*Rêverie*]). Leifs did not receive

any serious musical training, however, until he moved to Leipzig in 1916 with fellow music students Páll Ísólfsen (1893-1974) and Sigurður Þórðarson (1895-1968).

Determined to be a musician—specifically a conductor and pianist—he was admitted to the Leipzig Conservatory, graduating in 1921. His studies included piano with Robert Teichmüller (1863-1939), conducting with Hermann Scherchen (1891-1966) and Otto Lohse (1858-1925), and composition with Aladár Szendrei (1884-1976) and Paul Graener (1872-1944). During this period, he composed *Torrek – Intermezzo*, op. 1/2 (1919) for piano and *Þríþætt hljómkviða*, op. 1 (Triologia piccola; 1919-24) for orchestra. It was also during this time that Leifs had his first real encounter with life outside of Iceland, including the rich heritage of European art music. As he later recalled:

My first stroll among tall trees was symbolic: the leaves in their autumn colours fell from the trees and were blown before the wind. Never had I imagined anything like it. It was similarly symbolic for me when I first heard a symphony orchestra play: Liszt's *Faust Symphony*. I felt I could throw myself down on the floor and cry aloud in wonder.<sup>1</sup>

While at the conservatory, Leifs fell in love with a fellow student, the talented Jewish pianist Annie Riethof (1897-1970). Leifs's marriage to Riethof the same year as his conservatory graduation, however, would later have a substantial negative impact on both his life and profession in Germany. In the meantime, while on their honeymoon, he became enamored with the folk music of his native country, writing several articles on the subject over the course of the next few years. The artistic result of this discovery—Leifs's resolution to devote his life to writing works based on Icelandic folk music—immediately changed the course of his compositional career. Among the first pieces he

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<sup>1</sup> Jón Leifs as quoted by Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson, liner notes for *Jón Leifs: Geysir and Other Orchestral Works* (BIS: CD-830, 1997) 3.

produced at this time, in which native folk music plays a quintessential role, were his *Fjögur lög fyrir pianoforte*, op. 2 (Four Pieces for the Piano; 1921) and the *Íslensk þjóðlög* (Icelandic Folk-Songs; 1925).

Jón Leifs made considerable use of his skills as a conductor during the 1920's as conductor of both the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and Hamburg Philharmonic. It was with the latter ensemble, in fact, that he first introduced Iceland to live performances of symphonies and concertos by Mozart and Beethoven, as well as works by other Continental composers, in 1926. Folk music collection trips in Iceland around this same time yielded the material for Leifs's next two major orchestral works—*Minni Íslands*, op. 9 (Iceland Overture; 1926) and the *Konsert fyrir orgel og hljómsveit*, op. 7 (Concerto for Organ and Orchestra; 1930)—as well as what are perhaps his two most popular piano compositions—*Rímnadanslög*, op. 11 (Icelandic Dances; 1928) and *Ný rímnadanslög*, op. 14b (New Icelandic Dances; 1931). During the first few years of the 1930's, he was involved in various musical projects in Iceland, including the formation of the country's first string orchestra and the musical direction of the Icelandic Broadcasting Service. Both of these projects ended rather abruptly, however, the former due to the lack of proficient players and the latter due to artistic differences, leaving Leifs quite frustrated with the country's cultural life.

Returning to Germany in the late 1930's, Leifs enjoyed considerable popularity as a composer during the early years of the Third Reich. Not only was his complete oeuvre to date published, but his music was widely performed throughout the country and broadcast on the radio. In addition, he served under Richard Strauss (1864-1949) on a music committee of the Nazi Party. Such popular and political success was no doubt

largely due to Leifs's Aryan heritage as an Icelandic, as well as his strong interest in Nordic culture. It was also at this time that he wrote his first string quartet, *Mors et vita*, op. 21 (Death and Life; 1939), and began to incorporate aspects of Icelandic myth and legend into his music, completing the first of his three massive *Edda*-oratorios—*Edda I* “*Sköpun heimsins*,” op. 20 (The Creation of the World; 1935-39)—and the cantata *Guðrúnarkviða*, op. 22 (The Lay of Guðrun; 1940) by the end of the decade.

The harsh modernism of Leifs's musical language, however, did not fit well within the Nazi Party's narrowing view of acceptable art. Probably even more damaging was his marriage to a Jew and fathering of their two daughters, Snót and Líf. Both took their toll on career quickly enough—by the first few years of the 1940's, his music not only disappeared from concert halls, but faced strong disapproval from critics and the public, and was banned by the Party. Nevertheless, he continued to compose, albeit in virtual isolation, soon completing what is today perhaps his most celebrated score—the *Sinfónía I* “*Söguhetjur*,” op. 26 (Symphony No. 1 “Saga Heroes”; 1942), or *Sögusinfónían* (Saga Symphony). Following the death of his mother-in-law in a Nazi concentration camp, both he and his family escaped Germany for Sweden in 1944. Marital strife, however, soon resulted in a divorce from Annie.

Leifs returned alone to Iceland in 1945 and threw himself into establishing and aiding a number of organizations aimed at securing and preserving the rights of Icelandic artists, such as the *Tónskáldafélagi Íslands* (Icelandic Composers' Union; fd. 1945) and the *Samband Tónskálda og Eigenda Flutningsréttar* (STEF/Iceland Performing Rights Association; fd. 1948). He also completed work on his substantial *Edda*-based drama, *Baldr*, op. 34 (1943-47). Unfortunately, the next several years were to be plagued by

both personal and professional tragedy. To begin, his younger daughter, Líf (1929-47), drowned in 1947, resulting in several of Leifs's most moving pieces, including the *Requiem*, op. 33b (1947) and his second string quartet, *Vita et mors*, op. 36 (Life and Death; 1951). Then, the 1950 premiere of *Sögusinfónlan*, in Finland, and subsequent radio broadcast, met with critical disdain both at home and abroad. A second marriage the same year, to the Swedish hotel-owner Althea Heintz (1905-77), was just as unsuccessful, ending in divorce in 1956.

The final decade of Leifs's life, however, was more positive. After getting married for a final time in 1956 to Þorbjörg Jóhannsdóttir Möller (b. 1919), with whom he had a son, Leifur, Leifs entered the last, but perhaps most productive, period of his compositional career. Among the works produced this decade were his four tone poems based on the physical features of his native country, *Geysir*, op. 51 (1961); *Hekla*, op. 52 (1961); *Dettifoss*, op. 57 (1964); and *Hafts*, op. 63 (Drift Ice; 1965); the two single-movement cantatas based on the *Poetic Edda*, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, op. 61 (The Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer; 1964) and *Grógaldur*, op. 62 (The Spell of Gróa; 1965); and his third string quartet, *El Greco*, op. 64 (1965). He also completed the second of his massive *Edda*-based oratorios, and made extensive progress on the third—*Edda II "Líf guðanna,"* op. 42 (The Lives of the Gods; 1966) and *Edda III "Ragnarök,"* op. 65 (The Twilight of the Gods; 1968), respectively. Jón Leifs died in Reykjavík on July 30, 1968, survived by Þorbjörg, Snót (b. 1923), and Leifur (b. 1957).

### **Jón Leifs: The Composer**

Jón Leifs's importance to the history of Nordic art music cannot be overstated, due in no small part to the incorporation of native folk music elements and/or materials

from Norse myth and legend in most of his greatest compositions. Although he spent a large portion of his career abroad—without achieving any lasting popularity or success until several years after his death—Leifs was determined to craft a distinctive musical language for his native country based on nationalistic elements, particularly Icelandic folk music, from which he derived several of the rhythmic and harmonic devices employed in many of his own art music compositions. In addition, his musical language, with its almost expressionistic qualities, tends to be monumental in power and scope, reflecting a combination of both modern and primitive elements. The remainder of this chapter will focus on Leifs's compositional style and just a few of his more than sixty completed works.

In general, only Leifs's earliest scores quote actual Icelandic folk melodies, while his mature compositional style features the full integration of native folk music elements—specifically *rimur* (rhyme) chant and *tvísöngur* (two-singing). *Rimur* (sing. *ríma*) are lengthy epic poems that, during the Middle Ages, were chanted in the evening at Icelandic family gatherings. This style of recitation employs irregular meters and a narrow melodic range. *Tvísöngur*, meanwhile, is a vocal practice, not unlike organum, in which one voice is accompanied by another primarily at parallel fifths, with fourths and octaves appearing occasionally as passing notes. This practice may be applied to a number of Icelandic poetic forms, including *rimur*. When used in art music compositions, parallel intervals of a fifth, whether associated with *tvísöngur* or not, often result in austere harmonies. Such is certainly the case in Leifs's music. In discussing the composer's use of both *rimur* and *tvísöngur*, John Pickard states:

This dual tradition lies at the heart of Jón Leifs's compositional technique and its highly idiosyncratic nature accounts in very large

measure for the apparent strangeness of Leifs's own musical language. It is a language of gesture, proceeding by juxtaposition of ideas and rarely concerned with smooth transition. It is also a language of extremes: registral, textual and dynamic.<sup>2</sup>

Key signatures are noticeably absent from the majority of Leifs's scores, with modality, rather than tonality, being central to his harmony. In general, Leifs employs the standard Medieval modal system in his music, with the Lydian mode receiving particular attention in many of his compositions. The most original aspect of his harmonic language, in addition to modality and the parallel fifths of *tvísöngur*, is the use of chordal progressions built of common diatonic triads, as well as diminished seventh chords, which are usually third-related.

The use of various instrumental timbres is also rather important to Leifs's musical language, especially in some of his later scores. Further, as in many of Igor Stravinsky's works, primitivism is a key factor in quite a few of Jón Leifs's works. This most frequently occurs through his use of harsh, irregularly-occurring percussive accents that are in contrast to the music's underlying texture. Though referring specifically to this technique in *Sögusinfónían*, the following statement by Pickard may be applied almost universally to Leifs's oeuvre:

The texture is punctuated by stabbing, irregularly placed *fortissimo* chords in brass and timpani. These generally pursue their own independent course, contributing powerfully to the overall feeling that this music is constructed through the aggregation of self-contained blocks of material.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Pickard, "Jón Leifs (1899-1968)," *Tempo* 208 (1999): 10.

<sup>3</sup> Pickard, 11.

Additional power is added to many of Leifs's scores through the use of augmented orchestral forces, particularly percussion. There is some speculation concerning his attraction to percussion, however, with John Pickard implying that Leifs was influenced in this regard by a meeting with Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924), an instructor of Edgard Varèse (1883-1965). However, today's leading Leifs scholar, Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, essentially dismisses this theory, instead attributing the composer's use of percussion to his ideas of "Nordic character." Further, Ingólfsson believes that Leifs's use of percussion was influenced far more by the symphonic music of Mahler, particularly the Seventh Symphony, than by Busoni or Varèse.<sup>4</sup>

In general, Leifs's music requires that orchestral percussion sections be enlarged to about twelve players. In the case of *Hekla*, however, in which the composer musically depicts the eruption of Iceland's most infamous volcano, nineteen to twenty-two percussionists are required.<sup>5</sup> Further, from time to time, Leifs insisted on rather unusual, and often unobtainable, percussion instruments—including anvils, sheets of metal, wood objects, mooring chains, sirens, and even large stones—which were usually used to intensify finale passages. Once, when questioned about the difficulty posed by his musical demands, Leifs simply responded, *à la Beethoven*, "This is not my problem. I write it, you play it."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Per an e-mail conversation with Ingólfsson on August 12, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Pickard, 12-14.

<sup>6</sup> Jón Leifs as quoted by Eggert Pálsson, liner notes for *Hekla* (BIS: CD1030, 1999) 7.

Prior to the mid-1920's, however, Leifs's musical style tended towards the late-German Romanticism in which he had been trained at the Leipzig Conservatory, though even before this point he demonstrated knowledge of recent musical trends in his juvenile miniature *Vökudraumur* (*Hugleiðing* [*Rêverie*]) from 1913. His complete mastery of late-Germanic Romanticism, however, is evident in his first full-length score, the highly-chromatic *Torrek – Intermezzo*, op. 1/2 (1919) for piano, which he later reworked as the second movement of his orchestral suite *Þríþætt hljómkviða*, op. 1 (Triologia piccola; 1919-24). In fact, it was in this latter three-movement work—inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, though without any programmatic connotations—that Leifs's signature style of dark, dense textures, slowly building climaxes, and strong reliance on percussive elements first became apparent. With his discovery of Icelandic folk music in 1921, however, Leifs began to incorporate aspects of this native musical influence into his compositions as well. Of this discovery, the composer stated:

I began to search and search, trying to answer the urgent question of whether we Icelanders possessed material, like other nations, which might be renewed and from which a new music might be created, a spark that might turn into a blaze. Then the world of folk-music opened up and I felt that I was in touch with the elements.<sup>7</sup>

Though the "Finale" of *Þríþætt hljómkviða* displays some of this influence, Leifs's first works in which the style of Icelandic folk music was wholly integrated are the piano pieces *Fjögur lög fyrir pianoforte*, op. 2 (Four Pieces for the Piano; 1921) and *Íslensk þjóðlög* (Icelandic Folk-Songs; 1925). The former serves an almost transitional role in Leifs's oeuvre, literally moving the listener from the world of late-German

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<sup>7</sup> Jón Leifs as quoted by Örn Magnússon, liner notes for *Jón Leifs: The Complete Piano Music* (BIS: CD-692, 1995) 5-6.

Romanticism in its opening “Valse lento” to that of Icelandic folk music in its ensuing “Ísland farsælda frón” (Icelandic Prelude), “Rímnalog” (Icelandic Ballad), and “Rímnakviða” (Icelandic Scherzo). His *Íslensk þjóðlög*, meanwhile—consisting of thirty-one short pieces covering the gamut of tempos and folksong styles—is structured along the same lines as Edvard Grieg’s *Norske danser og viser*, op. 17 (Norwegian Dances and Songs; 1870) and *Norske Folkeviser*, op. 66 (Norwegian Folk Tunes; 1896). Unfortunately, these pieces, as well as Leifs’s new artistic goal, met with great skepticism and even scorn from his Icelandic contemporaries—opinions that would not change until after his death.

Leifs’s next handful of major compositions continues to display his strong use of Icelandic folk music as the basis for his art music. According to the composer, *Minni Íslands*, op. 9 (Iceland Overture; 1926), one of his most popular and accessible works, demonstrates “the fundamental features of Icelandic folk music without attempting to improve the melodies, or to make use of any kind of compositional craftsmanship.”<sup>8</sup> The overall tonal score may also be seen as somewhat programmatic as Leifs claims to have been inspired to write it by the landscape and history of Iceland. Though *Minni Íslands* is scored primarily for orchestra, the closing moments feature a chorus singing verse by Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940) and Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-45).

The *Konsert fyrir orgel og hljómsveit*, op. 7 (Concerto for Organ and Orchestra; 1930) is considerably more avant-garde than *Minni Íslands*. Though it was initially popular with audiences and critics at its 1935 premiere, a performance of the *Konsert*

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<sup>8</sup> Jón Leifs as quoted by Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, liner notes for *Jón Leifs: Hekla and Other Orchestral Works* (BIS: CD-1030, 1999) 5.

*fyrir orgel og hljómsveit* in Nazi Germany in 1941 met with disdain and condemnation, essentially ending Leifs's career in Germany altogether. The bulk of material in this three-movement score is found in the dense inner "Passacaglia" movement, where a principal Bach-like theme mixes with that of an authentic Icelandic funeral chorale as well as several folk-like melodies. "The combination of all this melodic material in a thick web of counterpoint and dissonance marks this as the most stunning achievement of Jón Leifs's early career," states Leifs scholar Árni Heimir Ingólfsson.<sup>9</sup>

Leifs wrote his two sets of Icelandic folkdances—*Rímnadanslög*, op. 11 (Icelandic Dances; 1928) and *Ný rímnadanslög*, op. 14b (New Icelandic Dances; 1931)—for consumption and performance by the general public. The former consists of authentic folk music, while the latter, though stylistically resembling Icelandic folk music, is entirely Leifs's own musical creation. Though both were initially written for piano, *Rímnadanslög* also exists in several other versions, including an arrangement for full orchestra. The first of Leifs's three string quartets, *Mors et vita*, op. 21 (Death and Life; 1939), meanwhile, is a single-movement work, though consisting of eight distinct sections, based on the *tvisöngur* "Húmar að mitt himsta kvöld" (My Last Night is Approaching). His two later string quartets—*Vita et mors*, op. 36 (Life and Death; 1951) and *El Greco*, op. 64 (1965)—on the other hand, are multi-movement programmatic works, the former being based on Líf's life.

It was during the closing years of the 1930's and initial few of the next decade that Leifs completed the first three of his compositions that are based on Nordic myth and

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<sup>9</sup> Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, liner notes for *Jón Leifs: Dettifoss and Other Orchestral Works* (BIS: CD-930, 1999) 6.

legend: *Edda I* “*Sköpun heimsins*,” op. 20 (The Creation of the World; 1935-39); *Guðrúnarkviða*, op. 22 (The Lay of Guðrún; 1940); and *Sinfónía I* “*Söguhetjur*,” op. 26 (Symphony No. 1 “Saga Heroes”; 1942), or *Sögusinfónían* (Saga Symphony). In addition to his genuine interest in the Nordic myths and legends, Leifs felt obligated to write these and other such later scores as “a protest against Wagner, who so abominably misapprehended Nordic essence and Nordic artistic tradition.”<sup>10</sup> In so doing, he hoped to restore to Iceland and the Nordic world the part of its culture that he felt had been lost to Germany primarily through Richard Wagner’s operatic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1853-74).

The first of such scores, *Edda I* “*Sköpun heimsins*,” was also the first of three massive oratorios composed by Leifs—the second and third being *Edda II* “*Líf guðanna*,” op. 42 (The Lives of the Gods; 1966) and *Edda III* “*Ragnarök*,” op. 65 (The Twilight of the Gods; 1968) respectively—all of which are based on material from the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*.<sup>11</sup> Both *Edda I*, in thirteen acts, and *Edda II*, in eight acts, are scored for soloists, chorus, and orchestra. Further, like George F. Handel’s *Messiah* (1741), these two oratorios forsake narrative material in favor of a series of images gathered from the mythology. *Edda III*, however, which remained incomplete at the time of the composer’s death, is scored for just chorus and orchestra. It presents a continuous

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<sup>10</sup> Jón Leifs as quoted by John Pickard, “Jón Leifs (1899-1968),” *Tempo* 208 (1999): 15.

<sup>11</sup> At the time of this writing, these three works have yet to be performed in their entirety or to be recorded.

narrative concerning Ragnarök—the demise of the Norse gods—while making extensive demands on the performers.<sup>12</sup> Concerning the *Poetic Edda*, Leifs wrote:

The poetry of the Edda is sharply etched and refined in its presentation: it is never long-winded or boring, let alone sentimental. The growing intensity of its rhythm created an image of rough, steep cliffs reaching towards the skies. The Eddic descriptions of the Creation also bear Icelandic characteristics: mountains and oceans, blustering winds and racing skies, pale twilight, waterfalls, glaciers and glacial rivers, blackened lava and evergreen spring meadows.<sup>13</sup>

*Guðrúnarkviða*, meanwhile, is one of three cantatas by Leifs with a libretto derived directly from the *Poetic Edda*, the other two—*Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, op. 61 (The Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer; 1964), and *Grógaldur*, op. 62 (The Spell of Gróa; 1965)—coming over twenty years later in the composer’s career. Scored for mezzo-soprano, tenor, bass, and orchestra, *Guðrúnarkviða* does not quote any actual Icelandic folk music but does incorporate the styles of both *tvisöngur* and *rímur*. Less ambitious in both length and musical scope is the thinly-textured *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, for alto, bass, and orchestra. In creating *Grógaldur*, however, Leifs wrote some of his most powerful and challenging music. Scored for alto, tenor, and orchestra, the work has the dramatic atmosphere of a miniature opera.

For Leifs, as well as the rest of the world, the 1940’s was a very difficult decade. In addition to the horrors of World War II, Leifs faced rejection from the very same German musical establishment that had embraced him the previous decade. His marriage to Annie Riethof fell apart, and his daughter Lif drowned. Nevertheless, the decade also

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<sup>12</sup> Pickard, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Jón Leifs as quoted by Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, liner notes for *Jón Leifs* (ITM: 9-01, 1999) 15.

marked the completion of two of the composer's seminal scores: *Sögusinfónían* and *Baldr*, op. 34 (1943-47). Both works have their basis in Nordic myth and legend—the former in several of the more notable Icelandic sagas and the latter in the two *Eddas*—and display the composer at the height of his mature musical powers. *Sögusinfónían* consists of five movements, each of which is a musical personification of a character from the Icelandic sagas. Scored exclusively for orchestra, including an enlarged percussion section, it is Leifs's only symphony.

*Baldr*, meanwhile, in two acts, bears the inaccurate subtitle “Tóndrama án orða” (Choreographic Drama without Words). While this large score is primarily orchestral, there are a few brief numbers featuring tenor and/or chorus as well, with the tenor role representing Odin. The composer gathered *Baldr*'s short libretto piecemeal from both the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*. In the first act, Leifs musically depicts the creation of man and the growing tension between the gods Baldr and Loki. The second act, containing the bulk of the vocal numbers, relates the *Prose Edda*'s “Gylfaginning” myths concerning Baldr's prophetic dreams, the oaths of creation not to harm him, the arrow game, Baldr's death and cremation, and Ragnarök.<sup>14</sup> In the final number, “Eldgos og friðþæging” (Volcanic Eruption and Atonement), Leifs musically depicted a volcanic eruption for the first time—an exercise he would repeat with even greater success in his later tone poem *Hekla*. Though *Baldr* was never performed during the composer's lifetime, he nonetheless considered it his greatest masterpiece, having devoted more time

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<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed summary of these mythological events, please refer to the discussion of Geirr Tveitt's *Solguð-symfonien* in Chapter 4.

and energy to its creation than to any other work in his compositional output. Equating the action in *Baldr* with that in Europe during the 1940's, Hilary Finch writes:

In the battle of wills between Baldur, son of Odin the Most High, and Loki, the embodiment of cunning and evil, Leifs played out the moral conflict of war; in the eruption of Hekla in the final scene, he created a microcosm of Europe's cataclysm. Baldur, the indestructible, is killed; Loki trembles forever in punishment. In the short, truncated denouement of Leifs' drama, hope is merely a hushed whisper that Baldur will come again.<sup>15</sup>

*Sögusinfónían* and *Baldr* were not the only scores completed by Leifs during the 1940's, however. The death of Líf in 1947 devastated the composer, prompting several of his most moving works, the finest of which is the short but beautiful *Requiem*, op. 33b (1947) for chorus *a cappella*. Rather than using the traditional Latin text, the composer constructed his *Requiem* libretto from a number of Icelandic folk poems and portions of an elegy by Jónas Hallgrímsson. From a musical standpoint, Leifs's *Requiem* is built almost entirely out of the interval of a fifth (A-E), with the addition of major and minor thirds for variety. Mention has already been made of his second string quartet, *Vita et mors*, in which each of the three movements depicts an aspect of his daughter's life.

After *Vita et mors*, however, Jón Leifs produced few works of note during the 1950's, though his creativity returned at the beginning of the following decade, no doubt due in large part to his marriage to Thorbjörg Jóhannsdóttir Möller and birth of their son, Leifur. Aside from those works already discussed—*Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, *Grógaldur*, *Edda II*, and *Edda III*—the 1960's saw four of the composer's most celebrated orchestral scores, each of which musically portrays a different aspect of the Icelandic

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<sup>15</sup> Hilary Finch, "Baldur's Time Has Come," *Nordic Sounds* (3/2000) 21.

landscape. Although these four tone poems stand alongside *Sögusinfónían* and *Baldur* in terms of importance in Leifs's oeuvre, their musical style is taken to such an extreme that they include little melodic material or motivic development, instead emphasizing static harmonies, strenuous rhythms, and extremes of dynamics. Further, each has similar musical content, beginning with near silence and swelling to a tremendous climax.

*Geysir*, op. 51 (1961), scored only for orchestra, vividly paints the 200-foot explosion of Iceland's most famous geyser. *Hekla*, op. 52 (1961), meanwhile, is scored for orchestra and chorus and sets a few lines of verse by Jónas Hallgrímsson. In this cacophonous work—quite possibly the loudest piece of art music ever composed—Leifs depicts the violent eruption of Iceland's most notorious volcano. The tone poem *Dettifoss*, op. 57 (1964), on the other hand, is more along the lines of a cantata in its praise of Northern Europe's most powerful waterfall. Scored for baritone, chorus, and orchestra, and featuring a text by Einar Benediktsson, *Dettifoss* portrays “the poet approaching the waterfall from afar, and then departing towards the end.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, in *Hafis*, op. 63 (Drift Ice; 1965), Leifs depicts the collision of massive pieces of ice near the Arctic Circle just north of Iceland through a series of musical swells and percussive climaxes. Scored for chorus and orchestra, *Hafis* also includes a setting of verse by Benediktsson.

The following two chapters will focus on several compositions by Jón Leifs that were inspired by Nordic myths and legends, specifically *Guðrúnarkviða*, *Helga kviða*, *Hundingsbana*, *Grógaldur*, and *Sögusinfónían*.

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<sup>16</sup> Jón Leifs as quoted by Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, liner notes for *Jón Leifs: Dettifoss and Other Orchestral Works* (BIS: CD-930, 1999) 8.

## CHAPTER 6 *SÖGUSINFÓNÍAN*

Prior to the twentieth century, Iceland produced very few art music composers of merit. In fact, the first of such figures, Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson (1847-1927), lived abroad for much of his career, spending time in Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, and North America. Nevertheless, he never lost sight of his Nordic roots, producing a number of works in which Icelandic folk music plays a role—including two orchestral scores and several piano pieces—as well as a hymn that later became the country's national anthem, *Lofsöngur* or *O Gud vors lands* (Song of Praise, or O God of Our Land; 1874). Iceland's next significant composer, Sigvaldi Kaldalóns (1881-1946), on the other hand, focused much of his creative energy on the production of fine art songs that reflect the Icelandic folk style, among which his “Á Sprengisandi” (Ride Hard Across the Sands) and “Ísland ögrum skori” (Iceland Deeply Carved), achieved popularity.

Contemporary with Jón Leifs were such Icelandic composers as Páll Ísólsson (1893-1974), Karl Ottó Rúnólfsson (1900-70), and Árni Björnsson (1905-95), the latter of whom composed the bulk of his major works prior to 1950. Nevertheless, none of the Icelandic composers prior to, or contemporary with Leifs, successfully tackled the symphonic genre. The lack of a proficient native symphony orchestra until 1950—at which point the *Sinfóníuhljómsveit Íslands* (Iceland Symphony Orchestra) was founded—was a likely deterrent for most of these figures, though even Sveinbjörnsson, who did

have orchestral resources abroad, did not write a symphony. For this reason, despite its rather non-traditional programmatic nature, Jón Leifs's *Sinfónía I* "Söguhetjur," op. 26 (Symphony No. 1 "Saga Heroes"; 1942), more commonly known as *Sögusinfónían* (Saga Symphony), is generally considered the first full-fledged Icelandic symphony.

Leifs composed *Sögusinfónían* during one of the darkest periods of his career. Rejected by the German musical establishment and all but banned by the Nazi Party, Leifs staged a personal protest throughout the course of the late 1930's and the 1940's by writing a small corpus of works that would glorify his Nordic heritage—including *Edda I* "Sköpun heimsins" (The Creation of the World; 1935-39); *Guðrúnarkviða*, op. 22 (The Lay of Guðrun; 1940); and *Baldr*, op. 34 (1943-47)—to which Leifs's only symphony belongs. *Sögusinfónían* was composed between March 1941 and July 1942, though not premiered until September 1950 at the Nordic Music Days Festival in Helsinki. The second and third performances, both in Reykjavík by the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, took place in 1972 and 1995 respectively.

Leifs undoubtedly drew inspiration for *Sögusinfónían* from *Eine Faust-Symphonie* (A Faust Symphony) of Franz Liszt (1811-1886), which he had heard during his first encounter with a symphony orchestra in 1916 shortly after traveling to Leipzig. Based on *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), *Eine Faust-Symphonie* portrays a different character from the drama in each of its three movements: "Faust," "Gretchen," and "Mephistopheles." According to Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson, however, it was not until the 1940's, as Leifs sought escape in the Icelandic sagas from the crumbling war-torn world, that he would find the subject matter—characters from the *Islendingasögur*

(Icelandic family sagas) “Njáls saga,” “Laxdæla saga,” “Grettis saga,” and “Fóstbræðra saga”—for the five movements of *Sögusinfónían*:

He shut himself in with his ideas, losing himself in the world of the old Icelandic manuscripts that, to him, was more real than the terror outside his door. In this world the characters in the sagas became magnificent heroes that no adversity could defeat and no power could force into submission. Only death could vanquish them, which these heroes met standing erect with a smile on their lips.<sup>1</sup>

*Sögusinfónían* is scored for an orchestra of piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets in B, two bassoons, two horns in F, two trumpets in C, two trombones, tuba, strings, timpani, and a large percussion section. In addition, the final movement calls for six *lurs*—primitive S-shaped bronze trumpets used in Scandinavia during the first millennium B.C. Among the more unique percussion instruments specified by Leifs are various sizes and type of stones, such as *pietri piccolo* and *pietri grande*; a whip, or *frusta*; iron anvils in various pitches, or *incudine*; shields of leather, wood, and iron, or *scudi*; and pieces of wood, or *legno piccolo* and *legno grande*, that are to be struck with large wooden hammers.

The musical material found in *Sögusinfónían* is quite typical of Leifs’s signature compositional style, which basically results in the nearly hour-long piece being a “textbook example” of the composer’s musical idiom. Nevertheless, according to Ragnarsson, Leifs was far less concerned with the compositional details of this score than he was with “[combining] all conceivable devices to let the ‘content’ appear as clearly and effectively as possible.”<sup>2</sup> The symphony’s melodies, for the most part, are built of

<sup>1</sup> Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson, liner notes for *Jón Leifs: Saga Symphony* (BIS: CD-730, 1995) 3–4.

<sup>2</sup> Leifs, as quoted by Ragnarsson, 6.

short angular motifs or thematic fragments, rather than fully-developed themes, while the harmonic material—modal rather than tonal—relies heavily on both the movement of parallel fifths, as in the Icelandic *tvísöngur* folksong style, and that of third-related diatonic triads and seventh chords. The *rimur* style, meanwhile—as generously represented in several movements of *Sögusinfónían* by lengthy solo passages for the bassoons—help shape the symphony’s rhythms and account for the numerous meter shifts found throughout the score. Various musical techniques are also used liberally in the score, including an extensive use of such techniques as *pizzicato*, *col legno*, and *sul ponticello* in the strings.

The overall arrangement and structure of *Sögusinfónían* roughly resembles a standard Romantic symphony layout—with a weighty opening movement marked *Allegro moderato, molto energico e rigido*; a more subdued second movement marked *Adagio, ma non troppo, sempre maestoso*; a “Scherzo” third movement marked *Allegro molto, ma non troppo, sempre scherzando*; an “Intermezzo” fourth movement marked *Adagio*; and a teleological closing movement marked *Allegro moderato e comodo*—though with an additional movement inserted between the Scherzo and Finale. Each movement’s individual structure, on the other hand, is more freely constructed. Further, there are no notable internal connections between the five movements, each instead meant to independently depict its subject matter. In this regard, *Sögusinfónían* resembles a tone poem cycle, much like *Má Vlast* (My Country; 1879) by Bedřich Smetana (1824–84) or Jean Sibelius’s *Lemminkäis-sarja*, op. 22 (Lemminkäinen Suite; 1895/1939), perhaps more than it does a symphony.

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Nevertheless, though Jón Leifs undoubtedly had specific scenes from the sagas in mind when he wrote *Sögusinfónían*, few speculations shall be made in this dissertation as to which particular narrative events his music is meant to depict. As Ragnarsson suggests:

Jón simply tells about these heroes in his music and stages the events as he envisages them as having taken place. It is therefore up to the listener to decide in each case what he means and whether these literary models have any general importance.<sup>3</sup>

### Skarphéðinn

“Skarphéðinn” is the first of two movements from *Sögusinfónían*, the second being “Björn að baki Kára,” for which Leifs drew inspiration from “Njáls saga.” However, instead of selecting either of the saga’s two principal characters—the wise lawyer Njál Þorgeirsson or the powerful warrior Gunnar Hámundarson—Leifs chose Njál’s eldest son Skarphéðinn Njálsson as the movement’s programmatic subject. While perhaps a surprising choice considering the relatively small number of pages granted to him by the saga’s author, Skarphéðinn is possibly the most dynamic character in the work. Revered and feared for his skill as a warrior by both friends and enemies, Skarphéðinn may well have represented the archetypal saga hero to Leifs, as well as a fitting foil to Hitler and his Nazi regime. In fact, according to Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, “Skarphéðinn is one of the most manly figures in the saga, . . . it is well to keep this in mind. The expression of manliness does not disappear from his face for a moment.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ragnarsson, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971) 141-42.

Skarphéðinn is first mentioned in “Njáls saga” during the author’s description of many of the key characters in the saga, including Njál’s sons, in Chapter 25:

The sons of Njal must now be named. Skarphedin was the eldest, a big and strong man and a good fighter. He swam like a seal and was swift of foot, quick to make up his mind and sure of himself; he spoke to the point and was quick to do so, though mostly he restrained himself. His hair was reddish-brown and curled and he had fine eyes; his face was pale and sharp-featured, with a bent nose and a broad row of upper teeth. His mouth was ugly, and yet he was very like a warrior.<sup>5</sup>

Following this description, Skarphéðinn appears a number of times throughout “Njáls saga,” though rarely in a non-confrontational situation, with his appearance often being heralded by a sense of dread and anxiety from those who oppose him. Essentially, Skarphéðinn’s familial role—as a formidable masculine warrior who is quick to think and quick to act, but usually only when necessary—seems to counter that of his somewhat effeminate, though wise and respectable, father. Nevertheless, he continually shows a great deal of respect for both his father and mother throughout the saga, having inherited from the former “a sense of humor, strength of will, self-control, and resourcefulness in accomplishing whatever had to be done” and from the latter a “vigorous temperament and . . . philosophy of life.”<sup>6</sup>

As “Njáls saga” progresses, Skarphéðinn’s infamy also progresses, with his every appearance in the saga’s action adding validity to his dangerous persona. Even at the climax of the saga, as Njál and his sons are burned alive in their home by their enemies, Skarphéðinn shows no fear but continues to fight with all of his strength and courage

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<sup>5</sup> “Njal’s Saga,” Robert Cook, trans., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume III, Viðar Hreinsson, ed. (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997) 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> Sveinsson, 143.

until the roof collapses on him. Jón Leifs's "Skarphéðinn" music is as much a musical portrayal of the character as it is a musical description of his various adventures. In order to more fully understand both, brief attention must first be called to Skarphéðinn's words and deeds before undertaking an objective discussion of Leifs's music.

Concerning Skarphéðinn's command of words, Sveinsson writes, "He enjoys trading blow for blow and matching word with word, not the least so when the fun gets coarse and crude. . . . His words are as terse and pithy as epigrams, and never fail to hit their mark."<sup>7</sup> This fact is illustrated throughout "Njáls saga" both in the form of insults and of boasting. Examples of the former include his quick response to a statement from Hallgerður in Chapter 91, "Your words don't count, for you're either a cast-off hag or a whore,"<sup>8</sup> as well as that degrading Flosi's masculinity in Chapter 123, "Because if you are the sweetheart of the troll at Svinafell, as is said, he uses you as a woman every ninth night."<sup>9</sup> Skarphéðinn's boastful nature, though not unwarranted, may also be illustrated by a number of examples, with one of the most exciting occurring in Chapter 120:

Skarphedin stood with his axe at the ready and grinned and said, "I had this axe in my hand when I leaped twelve ells across the Markarfljot river and killed Thrain Sigfusson; eight men were standing around him and they didn't touch me. And I've never lifted a weapon against any man without hitting my mark."

With that he broke away from his brothers and Kari and rushed toward Thorkel.

Then he spoke: "You have two choices, Thorkel Bully: put away your sword and sit down, or I'll smash this axe into your head and split it down to your shoulders."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sveinsson, 142.

<sup>8</sup> "Njal's Saga," 109.

<sup>9</sup> "Njal's Saga," 148.

<sup>10</sup> "Njal's Saga," 144.

Considerably more revealing of Skarphéðinn's character, however, are the many scenes in which his prowess as a great Viking warrior is demonstrated. There is no doubt that Jón Leifs found a great deal of inspiration for his musical depiction of Skarphéðinn in such passages as the following three—from Chapters 45, 92, and 99 respectively—each of which relates a significant battle in which Skarphéðinn figures prominently:

Sigmund took his weapons, and Skarphedin waited for him. . . . Sigmund had a helmet on his head and a shield and a sword at his belt and a spear in his hand. He turned to face Skarphedin and thrust at him with his spear and it struck the shield. Skarphedin cut through the spear-shaft with his axe and raised his axe again and swung at Sigmund, and it struck the shield and split it down to below the handle. Sigmund drew his sword with his right hand and struck at Skarphedin, but the sword hit the shield and stuck fast there. Skarphedin twisted the shield so quickly that Sigmund lost his grip on the sword. Then Skarphedin swung at Sigmund with his axe; Sigmund was wearing a corslet, and the axe came down on his shoulder and cut through the shoulder blade. Skarphedin then pulled the axe toward himself, so that Sigmund fell forward on both his knees, and at once he jumped up. . . . Skarphedin struck him on the helmet and after that struck the death blow.<sup>11</sup>

It happened, while they were running down along the river, that Skarphedin's shoe-string snapped and he fell behind. . . . Skarphedin jumped up as soon as he tied his shoe, and he had his axe at the ready. He ran to the river, but for a long stretch it was too deep to wade across. A broad slab of ice, smooth as glass, had formed on the other side of the river, and Thrain and his men were standing in the middle of it. Skarphedin took off into the air and leaped across the river from one ice-covered bank to the other and landed and continued forward in a slide. The ice slab was very smooth, and Skarphedin went along as fast as a flying bird.

Thrain was about to put on his helmet, but Skarphedin came at him first and swung his axe at him and hit him on his head and split it down to the jaw, so that the teeth fell out on the ice. This happened in such rapid sequence that no one could land a blow on Skarphedin; he went gliding away at a high speed. Tjorvi threw a shield in his way,

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<sup>11</sup> "Njal's Saga," 53-54.

but he leaped over it and landed smoothly and slid to the end of the ice slab.<sup>12</sup>

They went to where Skarphedin had heard voices and saw Lyting and his brothers by the side of a stream. Skarphedin at once jumped over the stream and landed on the gravel slope on the other side. Hallgrim and his brothers were standing higher up. Skarphedin swung at Hallgrim's thigh so hard that he took the leg off at once, and with his other hand he grabbed Hallkel. Lyting made a thrust at Skarphedin, but Haldi came up then and caught the blow on his shield. Lyting picked up a stone with his other hand and hit Skarphedin with it. Hallkel was then free of Skarphedin's grip and ran up the slope but could not manage except by crawling on his knees. Skarphedin smashed his axe at him and cut through his backbone.<sup>13</sup>

As previously mentioned, Skarphédinn's strength and courage do not wane throughout "Njáls saga." Even in the face of certain death, as he and his family are trapped in their burning house by their enemies, his words and deeds remain those of a great warrior, as in the following passage from Chapter 130:

Gunnar Lambason leaped up on the wall and saw Skarphedin and said, "What's this? Are you crying now, Skarphedin?"

"Not at all," he said, "though it's true that my eyes are smarting. But it seems to me that you're laughing – or am I wrong?"

"You're right," said Gunnar, "and this is the first time I have laughed since you killed Thrain."

Skarphedin said, "Then here's something to remember him by."

He took from his purse one of the molars he had hacked out of Thrain and threw it at Gunnar's eye, so that it fell out at once onto the cheek. Gunnar then fell off the roof.

Skarphedin then went to his brother Grim; they joined hands and stamped down the fire. When they reached the middle of the hall Grim fell down dead. Skarphedin went on to the end of the house, and then there was a loud crash, and the whole roof fell down. He was caught between it and the gable wall and could not budge.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Njal's Saga," 112.

<sup>13</sup> "Njal's Saga," 120.

<sup>14</sup> "Njal's Saga," 157-58.

The music Jón Leifs wrote for the opening movement of *Sögusinfónían* is no less vivid than the many battle scenes from “Njáls saga” in which Skarphéðinn proves his prowess as a great Viking warrior. Rather than using Skarphéðinn’s sharp words or his powerful axe, Rimmugýgur (Battle-hag), however, Leifs employs the full resources of his unique musical language to graphically depict “the high-minded but ill-fated warrior who, with more zeal than foresight, . . . goes unhesitatingly to meet his fate and in death achieves the greatest glory.”<sup>15</sup> By far the longest and most complex movement of *Sögusinfónían*, “Skarphéðinn” quite appropriately sets the mood for the entire symphonic work while simultaneously resembling in style, musical content, and consequence an independent tone poem comparable with those of Liszt, Strauss, and Sibelius.

The overall structure of “Skarphéðinn” is rather straightforward, consisting of three principal sections, arranged in a fast-slow-fast, as well as loud-soft-loud, pattern, followed by a very brief concluding section.<sup>16</sup> The first section, measures 1 to 275, is marked *Allegro moderato, molto energico e rigido* and features chordal material alternated with metrically-shifting rhythmic passages, resembling *rimur*, for the bassoons and strings. The second section, measures 276 to 377, carries a *tranquillo* marking and is scored primarily for the strings, but includes a few woodwind and horn solos. In the final section, measures 378 to 549, which features notable solo passages for the horns and bassoons, the musical material of the two previous sections is essentially combined, with the chordal style of the opening section being dominant. All three of these sections,

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<sup>15</sup> Ragnarsson, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Though not discussed in this dissertation, there may also be a connection between the structural features of this movement, as well as others in *Sögusinfónían*, and the “epic laws” of narrative devised by Axel Olrik (1864-1917).

including the otherwise sedate second section, are punctuated by the irregularly-occurring percussive accents that are characteristic of his mature style. The concluding *mezzo piano* section, measures 550-563, meanwhile, consists of a bassoon solo and a short brass passage over a lightly-textured string accompaniment.

Despite the overall simplicity of the movement's basic three-part structure, however, "Skarphéðinn" is actually a rather complex piece of music—featuring an elaborate multi-sectional internal structure in which a variety of musical materials are alternated, repeated, layered, and interconnected—deserving of a considerably more thorough analysis than the inner three movements of *Sögusinfónían*. The next several pages contain a more detailed analysis of "Skarphéðinn" in which each of the movement's three principal sections, as well as the closing material, are broken down into smaller units.

### **Section One: Measures 1 to 275**

**Measures 1 to 14.** The movement opens in triple time with a *fortissimo* dotted half-note cluster in the strings and woodwinds, immediately resolving to an eighth-note unison in the same voices, with rests in the remainder of the second measure. This is followed by similar chordal material, of various lengths and in various rhythms, in both ascending and descending motion, for the next twelve measures. In measures 8 to 14, such material in the strings and woodwinds is alternated with that of the brass. Meanwhile, the timpani provides irregularly-spaced eighth-note punctuations throughout the section, joined on occasion by the brass.

**Measures 15 to 18.** In these few measures, the chordal material gives way to Leifs's signature irregularly-spaced eighth-note punctuations by the full orchestra.

**Measures 19 to 24.** Two short fanfares in the brass lead into the next section.

**Measures 25 to 48.** The importance of the two bassoons as solo instruments in “Skarphéðinn” cannot be overemphasized, as is apparent from this passage in which their first lengthy solo appears. The majority of the material, which consists primarily of fairly conjunct quarter notes and half notes played an octave apart by the two soloists, resembles the rhythmic Icelandic *rímur* folk style due to metrical shifts—featuring duple, triple, and quadruple time—in almost every measure. Aside from the occasional doubling of the bassoon part by the horns and trombones, as well as rhythmically by the timpani, the bulk of the orchestra rests during this section, as in the following example (measures 26 to 32).



**Measures 49 to 76.** This section, for full orchestra, is basically a restatement and expansion of the chordal material presented at the offset of the movement—though without the alternation of such material between sections.

**Measures 77 to 81.** As in measures 15 to 18, irregularly-spaced eighth-note punctuations dominate courtesy of the full orchestra.

**Measures 82 to 93.** Marked *Commodo, un poco animato, quasi scherzando, ma moderato*, this section elaborates on the material presented in measures 25 to 48, though with the notable addition of strings, occasionally joined by various woodwinds,

consisting of *pizzicato* eighth-note clusters on the downbeat of each measure. The first of a few short solos for piccolo and/or flute occurs in measures 92 to 93.

**Measures 94 to 110.** The first five measures of this section feature just the brass and percussion mimicking the bassoons' solo material. This is followed by a brief conversation between the bassoon and brass in measures 99 to 107, with the alternation of two solo measures by the former with one by the latter, with measures 108 to 110 belonging solely to the bassoons. The same sparse *pizzicato* accompaniment provided by the strings in measures 82 to 93 recurs in measures 99 to 110 of this section.

**Measures 111 to 161.** A reversal of roles occurs in this heavily-accented fifty-measure section, marked *martellato*, as the unison bassoon solo is doubled by the strings with the brass providing *staccato* eighth-note clusters—often featuring the fifths of *tvísöngur*—on the downbeat of each measure instead. Most of the section is further enhanced by slowly-moving solos for the piccolo and/or flute, as in the following example (measures 125 to 130).

The image shows a page of a musical score for measures 125 to 130. The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Piccolo, Clarinet in B-flat, Flute, Cor Anglais, Trombone, Trumpet, Tuba, Snare Drum, Cymbal, Solo, Violin, and Cello/Double Bass. The music features a driving eighth-note pattern in the brass and percussion, with a unison bassoon solo (labeled 'un piccolo' in the flute part) and a string solo (labeled 'martellato' in the solo part). The tempo is marked 'Allegro'.

**Measures 162 to 174.** Marked *poco a poco un poco meno mosso al tempo primo*, this brief section finds the bassoon and strings, save the contrabass, joining the majority of the orchestra in the aforementioned *staccato* eighth-note clusters and fifths. The slow-moving flute solos continue, while the principal solo material—that of the bassoons—shifts to the tuba, individually marked *martellato*.

**Measures 175 to 242.** Overall, this section, marked *a tempo primo, allegro moderato molto energico e rigido*, is yet another return to the chordal material of measures 1 to 14 and 49 to 81, at least in the woodwind and string sections. The brass—continuing to feature the tuba—meanwhile, alternate short, rhythmic punctuations and miniature solo passages with the chordal material of the rest of the orchestra. Also notable is a single *sforzando* half-note chord, performed by the bulk of the orchestra, in measure 218.

**Measures 243 to 261.** As in measures 15 to 18 and 77 to 81, irregularly-spaced eighth-note punctuations dominate courtesy of the full orchestra.

**Measures 262 to 264.** These three measures contain the first occurrence of a chromatically ascending and descending scale in the woodwinds and strings, accompanied by *tvísöngur* chords in the brass, perhaps best labeled a “chromatic arch,” which ascends from  $A^3$  to  $F^7$  before descending, as in the following example (measures 262 to 264).



**Measures 265 to 274.** Once again, irregularly-spaced eighth-note punctuations dominate courtesy of the full orchestra.

**Measure 275.** A full measure of rest, in triple time, divides the movement's opening section from the middle section.

#### **Section Two: Measures 276 to 377**

The entire middle section of "Skarphéðinn," marked *tranquillo*, features fairly expressive material in the strings, usually below the *pianissimo* dynamic level, over which there are a number of short woodwind solos, including one for single bassoon in measures 315 to 326, and a few short passages for brass. The overall tranquil nature of this short middle section, however, is occasionally interrupted by Leifs's signature irregularly-spaced eighth-note punctuations by various instrumental groups.

#### **Section Three: Measures 378 to 549**

**Measures 378 to 382.** The second section is divided from the third section by four measures of irregularly-spaced eighth-note punctuations in the woodwinds, brass, and percussion. A descending scale in the viola and contrabass parts, in measure 382, leads into the next section.

**Measures 383 to 428.** As the irregularly-spaced eighth-note punctuations continue, courtesy of various instrumental groupings, the chordal material prevalent in the movement's first section is gradually reiterated by the woodwinds and strings. Meanwhile, a number of short solos occur in the woodwind voices, particularly the clarinets and bassoons.

**Measures 429 to 490.** With the *fortissimo* chordal patterns of the movement's opening measures now fully reestablished in the woodwind and string parts, and the brass providing *staccato* eighth-note clusters and *tvisöngur* fifths at irregularly-occurring intervals, the horns, an octave apart, slowly become the focus through rather menacing *fortissimo* duplet and triplet eighth-note flourishes. Though such material initially appears on irregular occasions for less than a measure at a time, beginning in measure 472, it is constant until the end of the section, with the timpani joining rhythmically in measure 487, as in the following example (measures 483 to 487).



**Measures 491 to 514.** Three measures of irregularly-occurring eighth-note punctuations lead into more chordal material, this time primarily in the woodwinds and brass, for the next twenty-one measures. The strings, meanwhile, assisted rhythmically by the timpani, echo and elaborate on the horn flourishes from the last sixteen measures of the previous section.

**Measures 515 to 532.** Beginning on the last two beats of measure 514, the bassoons—doubled by the contrabass and cello—reclaim their role as the movement's principal soloists with a rather rhythmically elaborate solo in triple time for the majority of the section. The remaining woodwinds, brass, and upper strings, meanwhile, supply the irregularly-spaced eighth-note punctuations. Particularly notable from this section is

a single measure, 525, in which the woodwinds and brass play a *fortissimo* chord, in fifths, while the strings play a descending sixteenth-note chromatic scale that recalls the full-fledged “chromatic arch” of measures 262 to 264 and serves as a precursor to that of the next section.

**Measures 533 to 536.** These four measures contain the second of the movement’s two complete “chromatic arches,” ascending from G<sup>3</sup> to F<sup>7</sup> before descending. The one-measure expansion of this “chromatic arch” makes it slightly more dramatic than that of measures 262 to 264.

**Measures 537 to 543.** Irregularly-occurring eighth-note punctuations by nearly the full orchestra accompany another brief solo by the bassoons and lower strings.

**Measures 544 to 549.** Seemingly the final measures of the piece, due to the building of a large chord cluster by the full orchestra in measures 544 to 548 which leads to a massive *sforzando* eighth-note chord cluster on the downbeat of measure 549 that has C<sup>2</sup> as its lowest pitch and A<sup>7</sup> as its uppermost pitch. This is followed by two-and-a-half beats of rest extended by a fermata.

**Measures 550 to 563.** The closing fourteen measures of “Skarphéðinn,” perhaps representing the character’s death, contain the final solo material of the bassoons. The accompaniment, meanwhile, consists of subdued chordal material in the brass and strings giving way to just a few *pizzicato* eighth notes from the contrabass and cello on the downbeats of measures 558 to 560 and a two-beat *mezzo-piano* chord in the lower brass in measure 561. This is followed by a full measure of rest in all voices except the bassoons, which deliver the final notes of their solo. The last two beats of measure 563 contain a *tvísöngur* chord of G and D, played *piano*, by just the cello and viola.

### Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir

Though only somewhat akin to the tranquility of the second movement of Liszt's *Eine Faust-Symphonie*, the second movement of Jón Leifs's *Sögusinfónían*, also named for a female character, is no less an emotional contrast from the symphony's first movement than Liszt's "Gretchen" is from "Faust." The movement is named for Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir as depicted in "Laxdæla saga." Basically, Guðrún is the most renowned woman in all of the *Islendingasögur*, as well as the appropriate namesake of Guðrún, "the quintessential tragic heroine" from the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>17</sup> According to Peter Hallberg, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir—a noble woman surrounded by bloodshed and sorrow—"has come to stand as the archetype of the proud woman of pagan times whose violent emotions both in hate and in love demand their tribute of blood among the men in her life."<sup>18</sup> The initial and highly complimentary description of Guðrún occurs in Chapter 32 of "Laxdæla saga" as the author relates her lineage and information about her parents:

They had a daughter named Gudrun. She was the most beautiful woman ever to have grown up in Iceland, and no less clever than she was good-looking. She took great care with her appearance, so much so that the adornments of other women were considered to be mere child's play in comparison. She was the shrewdest of women, highly articulate, and generous as well.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 7 for additional information on Guðrún. Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (London: Cassell, 1998) 64 and 103.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, Paul Schach, trans. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1962) 137.

<sup>19</sup> "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," Keneva Kunz, trans., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume V, Viðar Hreinsson, ed. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997) 43.

Despite all of her positive qualities, however, Guðrún's life is rather difficult and sorrowful, due largely to four disastrous marriages and numerous conflicts, eventually resulting in her becoming a nun. Nevertheless, she maintains her dignity and pride throughout the saga, even in the face of great tragedy, such as her unpleasant encounter with the men who killed her beloved husband Bolli Þorleiksson—one of which uses her clothing to wipe Bolli's blood off of his weapon—in Chapter 55:

Gudrun then left the stream and came up towards Halldor and his party, and asked for news of their encounter with Bolli. They told her what had happened. Gudrun was wearing a long tunic, a close-fitting woven bodice and a mantle on her head. She had bound a shawl about her that was decorated in *black* stitching with fringes at the ends. Helgi Hardbeinsson walked over to Gudrun and used the end of her shawl to dry the blood off the spear with which he had pierced Bolli. Gudrun looked at him and merely smiled.<sup>20</sup>

A final display of Guðrún's poise and grace—as well as one of the most famous lines from any of the *Islendingasögur*—occurs in Chapter 78, during the closing moments of “Laxdæla saga.” In response to the pleading of her son, Bolli, to reveal which of her four husbands she loved the most, Guðrún confides that it is his own father, Bolli, that she most loved, despite the fact that she treated him the worst:

It is said that once when Bolli was visiting Helgafell, he sat with his mother, because Gudrun was always pleased when he came to see her, talking of many things for a long time.

Then Bolli spoke: “Will you tell me something, mother, that I'm curious to know? Which man did you love the most?”

Gudrun answered: “Thorkel was the most powerful of men and most outstanding chieftain, but none of them was more valiant and accomplished than Bolli. Thord Ingunnarson was the wisest of these men and the most skilled in law. Of Thorvald I make no mention.”

Bolli then spoke: “I understand clearly enough what you say of the qualities of each of your husbands, but you have yet to answer whom you loved the most. You've no need to conceal it any longer.”

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<sup>20</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal,” 87.

Gudrun answered, “You press me hard on this point, my son,” she said. “If I wished to say this to anyone, you would be the one I would choose.”

Bolli asked her to do so.

Gudrun then spoke: “Though I treated him worst, I loved him best.”

“That I believe,” said Bolli, “you say in all sincerity,” and thanked her for satisfying his curiosity.<sup>21</sup>

Marked *Adagio, ma non troppo, sempre maestoso*, “Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir”

contains by far the most genteel music found in *Sögusinfónían*. The overall structure of the movement alternates expressive string passages with warm brass chorales, and more agitated sections for full orchestra. In addition, a number of expressive solos are provided by the woodwinds, particularly the flute. The movement’s principal theme, which recurs a number of times throughout “Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir,” is a descending line, begun on various pitches, consisting rhythmically of a dotted eighth note, followed in turn by a sixteenth note and three quarter notes.

“Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir” opens with the strings and woodwinds with the only thematic material of *Sögusinfónían* that may truly be described as lyrical, as in the following example (measures 1 to 8).



<sup>21</sup> "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," 119.

Following these opening measures, the first brass chorale appears in measures 25 to 27, only to be quickly supplanted by additional woodwind solos. All three sections—the woodwinds, brass, and strings—are combined in measures 48 to 57, leading into a short *maestoso* section at measure 58 for the woodwinds, strings, and solo horn, in which the brass section features prominently. The growing intensity of chordal material in measures 74 to 100 results in a dense, almost organ-like texture at times, with the section concluding in measures 103 to 104 with a rapidly descending woodwind and string line. A rather agitated section, culminating with an eighth-note *fortissimo* chord in measure 115, follows.

The next thirty-five measures mark a return to more tranquil material, though with occasional musical swells. A lengthy flute solo begins in measure 138, with the piccolo playing in unison with the flute a few measures later. A rather disjunct solo for unison muted trumpets, consisting almost entirely of sixteenth notes, begins in measure 144 and concludes in measure 149 with two *forte* eighth-note chords in the full orchestra. A few more fairly sedate measures lead into a *molto maestoso* section at measure 160 in which a slight variation of the movement's principal theme is presented several times by the full orchestra. Beginning in measure 171, the remainder of “Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir,” for the most part, consists of the same sort of lyrical material that opened the movement. Finally, just as Guðrún in “Laxdæla saga” spends the last years of her life as a nun, the *Sögusinfónían* movement named for her concludes in measures 191 to 207 with a section marked *molto tranquillo, religioso* in which expressive passages in the woodwinds and strings, and a miniature brass chorale, bring the work to its end. The closing measure contains a *pianissimo* chord, elongated by a fermata, in the strings.

### Björn að baki Kára (Scherzo)

For the third movement of *Sögusinfónían*, “Björn að baki Kára” (Björn behind Kári), Leifs chose programmatic material that reflects the traditional meaning of the term Scherzo as a “jest” or “joke.” The movement is based on episodes from Chapters 150 and 151 of “Njáls saga” in which Kári Sölmundarson, a fine warrior and friend of Skarphéðinn who is sworn to avenge the murder of Njál’s family, is forced to fight his enemies while acting as a human shield for the braggart Björn í Mörk. The events of this scene, combined with the ridiculously boastful, yet pitiable, nature of Björn, make this the most comical moment in “Njáls saga,” as well as one of the most comical moments in all of the *Islendingasögur*: “Unremitting irony and deep sympathy are intertwined in the account of Björn of Mörk. . . . Nowhere in the saga is the irony so subtle, so sophisticated, nowhere is the comedy more refined or purer.”<sup>22</sup>

Though Leifs derived the Scherzo movement’s title directly from the specific events of the aforementioned fight, the nature of Björn as a tragically humorous braggart is established slightly earlier, in Chapter 148, as he attempts to convince Kári of his worthiness as a warrior while simultaneously dodging the insults of his unloving wife:

Then Kari rode away; he had two horses, his weapons and clothes, and some silver and gold. He rode west past Seljalandsmuli and up along the Markarfljot all the way to Thorsmork. There are three farms there with the name Mork. In the middle one lived a man named Bjorn, called Bjorn the White; . . . He was married to a woman named Valgerd; . . . She was married to Bjorn for his money and did not love him much, and yet they had children together. They had enough of everything at their farm. Bjorn was a man given to self-praise, and his wife hated that. Bjorn was sharp-sighted and swift of foot.

Here it was that Kari came for hospitality, and the couple received him with open arms; he was there overnight.

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<sup>22</sup> Sveinsson, 80.

In the morning he and Bjorn talked together. Kari said, "I'd like you to take me in, for I sense that I am in good hands with you. I would like you to be with me on my travels, because you're keen-sighted and swift, and I suspect that you have great courage."

Bjorn answered, "I won't question my keen eyesight or my courage or my other manly qualities. You must have come here because you had no other place to turn, but at your request, Kari, I won't treat you the same as ordinary men. I shall certainly help you in everything you ask."

His wife heard this and spoke: "May trolls take your swaggering and strutting – you shouldn't try to fool both yourself and Kari with such deceit and nonsense. I'll gladly give Kari food and other good things which I know will be of use to him. But don't count on Bjorn for bravery, Kari, for I'm afraid he may not turn out to be as solid as he claims."

Bjorn answered, "You've often poured scorn on me, but I trust myself well enough to know that I won't take to my heels for anybody. The proof of it is that not many men look for a fight with me – no one dares!"<sup>23</sup>

According to Sveinsson, "Björn lives completely in his own world of wishful thinking," a place in which he can be a great warrior without ever having had the opportunity or need to prove anything, in much the same way as the delusional knight Don Quixote of Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616).<sup>24</sup> This fact remains true until the events of Chapters 150 and 151, at which time Björn has his first opportunity to put his words into action. While he actually turns out to be a fair warrior and even somewhat useful to Kári, Björn performs the bulk of his fighting while relatively safely tucked away behind Kári, as in the following two lengthy passages from Chapters 150 and 151 respectively:

Kari spoke to Bjorn: "Now we'll ride east across the mountains and down into Skaftartunga and travel on the sly through the district of

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<sup>23</sup> "Njal's Saga," 201-2.

<sup>24</sup> Sveinsson, 81.

Flosi's thingmen, for I'm planning to take passage abroad over in Alftafjord."

Bjorn said, "That's a risky undertaking, and not many men besides you and me would have the courage for it."

His wife spoke: "If you let Kari down, you might as well know that you'll never again come into my bed. My kinsmen will divide the property between us."

Bjorn answered, "It's more likely, dear wife, that you'll have to think of some other grounds for divorce, because I'm going to provide evidence of what a champion and man of prowess I can be when weapons clash."

That day they rode east into the mountains north of the glacier, but never rode on the common track, and then down into Skaftartunga and above all the farms until the Skafta river, and there they led their horses into a hollow, and kept on the look-out and placed themselves so that no one could see them.

Then Kari said to Bjorn, "What will we do if they ride down at us here from the mountain?"

Bjorn answered, "Aren't there two choices? Either ride away north along the slopes and let them ride past us, or else wait in case any of them fall behind, and then attack them?"

They discussed this at length, and Bjorn declared one moment that he would flee as fast as possible, and the next moment that he would stay and fight it out. Kari found this very amusing. . . .

A small point of land projected into the river. Kari went to it and told Bjorn to stand behind him and not put himself too far forward, and to give him as much support as he could.

Bjorn answered, "I never expected to have another man act as a shield for me, but as things are now, you must decide. Anyway, with my brainpower and speed I can still cause no little harm to our enemies."

The others all got up and ran at them, and Modolf Ketilsson was the fastest and thrust his spear at Kari. Kari had his shield raised before him, and the spear landed on the shield and stuck in it. Kari twisted the shield so that the spear broke; in the meantime he had drawn his sword and swung it at Modolf. Modolf struck back. Kari's sword struck the hilt and glanced off onto the wrist and cut off Modolf's hand, which fell to the ground along with his sword, and Kari's sword flew on into Modolf's side and went in between the ribs. He fell then, dead on the spot.

Grani Gunnarsson grabbed his spear and threw it at Kari, and Kari brought his shield down swiftly and stuck it into the ground and caught the spear in the air with his left hand and threw it back at Grani, and then picked up the shield with the same hand. Grani had his shield raised before him. The spear hit the shield and went right through it and passed through Grani's thigh just beneath the crotch and

into the ground, and he could not get loose from the spear until his companions pulled him off and carried him into a hollow and fenced him round with shields.

A man dashed forward and came at Kari from the side and tried to cut off his leg. Bjorn swung at him and cut off his hand and then dashed back behind Kari and they were not able to harm him. Kari took a swipe at this man with his sword and cut him in two at the waist.

Then Lambi Sigurdarson ran at Kari and swung at him with his sword. Kari caught the blow with the flat of his shield, and the sword did not bite. Kari lunged with his sword at Lambi's chest so that it went out between the shoulders; that was his death.

Then Thorstein Geirleifsson ran at Kari and tried to come at him from the side. But Kari caught sight of him and took a swipe with his sword across the shoulders so that he cut the man in two. A little later he dealt a death-blow to Gunnar of Skál, a good farmer.

Bjorn had wounded three men who had tried to get at Kari, but he was never far enough out front to be tested hard; he was not wounded in this fight, and neither was Kari, but all those who got away were wounded.<sup>25</sup>

Kari asked Bjorn, "What shall we try now? I want to test your brainpower."

Bjorn answered, "Do you think that a lot depends on our being very clever?"

"Yes, certainly," said Kari.

"Then it's quickly decided," said Bjorn. "Let's fool them all as if they were dumb *giants*. Let's pretend to ride north to the mountains, and as soon as a hill comes between us, let's turn back and come down along the Skafta river and hide in whatever seems the safest place while the pursuit is hot – if they follow us."

Kari answered, "That's what we'll do, because I'd already planned that."

"And you'll find out," said Bjorn, "that my brainpower is no less solid than my bravery."

He and Kari rode, as they planned, down along the Skafta until it branched to the east and to the south-east. They went along the middle branch and did not stop until they came to Medalland and a swamp called Kringlumyri. It has lava all around it.

Kari told Bjorn to watch the horses and be on the lookout – "I feel a drowsiness coming on."

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<sup>25</sup> "Njal's Saga," 204-5.

Bjorn watched the horses and Kari lay down and slept only a short while before Bjorn woke him. He had brought their horses up and they were standing close by.

Bjorn spoke: "You really couldn't do without me. A man with less courage would have run away from you, because now your enemies are riding at you. You had better make yourself ready."

Kari went under an overhanging rock.

Bjorn said, "Where am I to stand?"

Kari answered, "There are two choices before you. One is for you to stand behind me and hold a shield to protect yourself, if it can be of any use. The other is to get on your horse and ride away as fast as you can."

"I won't do that," said Bjorn. "There's much against it. First, it could happen that some wicked tongues might start saying that I ran away from you out of cowardice, if I rode off. Second, I know what a great catch they must consider me – two or three of them would ride after me, and then I'd be of no use or help to you. So, I'd rather stay with you and defend myself as long as fate allows."

They did not have long to wait before some pack-horses were driven across the swamp, and there were three men with them.

Kari said, "They don't see us."

"Let them ride on by," said Bjorn.

These men rode on, but then another six men came riding along, and they all leaped at once off their horses and attacked Kari and Bjorn. Glum Hildisson was first to rush at Kari and he thrust at him with his spear. Kari turned away on his heel and Glum missed him, and the spear hit the rock. Bjorn saw this and quickly hacked the point off Glum's spear. Kari, though off balance, swung his sword and caught him in the thigh and cut off his leg. Glum died on the spot.

Then the two sons of Thorfinn, Vebrand and Asbrand, rushed at him. Kari ran at Vebrand and drove his sword through him, and then he chopped both Asbrand's legs from under him. Kari and Bjorn were wounded in this exchange.

Then Ketil of Mork rushed at Kari and thrust at him with his spear. Kari threw his leg up and the spear went into the ground; Kari jumped on the shaft and broke it in two.

Then Kari grabbed Ketil in his arms. Bjorn rushed up at once and was about to kill Ketil.

Kari spoke: "Hold still. I will give Ketil peace – and even if it happens again that I have power over your life, I'll never kill you, Ketil."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> "Njal's Saga," 206-7.

Jón Leifs's music for the Scherzo movement of *Sögusinfónían*, marked *Allegro molto, ma non troppo, sempre scherzando*, is no less comical and lighthearted than these two scenes in which deadly combat is combined with the ridiculous nature of Björn. Further, "Björn að baki Kára" is the swiftest movement of the symphony, its 252 measures essentially passing undeterred by fermatas, tempo changes, or variations of mood. The bulk of the movement features shifting meters, most being of the eighth-note variety, and is driven by an alternation of ascending and descending eighth-note figures in the strings. The use of *pizzicato* in the strings, as well as staccato in all the instruments, is also a dominant feature of the movement.

Because the title "Björn að baki Kára" (Björn behind Kári) can really only be applied to the two aforementioned scenes in "Njáls saga," it is easier here than in the previous two movements of *Sögusinfónían* to speculate as to the exact programmatic events taking place in Leifs's music. To begin with there, is an alternation, as well as a polyphonic combination, between various woodwind passages and those for brass. It is conceivable to imagine, therefore, that the woodwind section, with its lighter and more amusing material, is meant to represent Björn, while the more noble brass section, with its brief fanfares and chorales, is meant to represent Kári. Further, in passages where the two sections play polyphonically, the heavier brass tend to overshadow the lighter woodwinds, just as Kári stands in front of Björn in battle. The second half of the movement includes the heavy use of percussion—including timpani, bass drum, gong, and an anvil in A—depicting the sounds of battle, especially that of clashing swords.

The movement opens with just the bassoons and strings, as well as the timpani, playing the swiftly-moving and heavily-accented material, which is largely consonant

and forms the foundation of the piece. The trumpet, supported by the rest of the brass, enters in measure 12, culminating with nearly the full orchestra on two *sforzando* sixteenth notes in measure 36. During the trumpet's solo passage, the movement's most dominant theme—a descending line consisting of a quarter note tied to a sixteenth, followed in turn by an additional sixteenth note, an eighth note, and two quarter notes—which appears a number of times in slight variations throughout the rest of the movement, is first presented, as in the following example (measures 29 to 31).



The next twenty-eight measures consist primarily of the same type of material that opened the movement, with the bassoon, as in “Skarphéðinn,” taking on a solo role. At measure 64, the full brass section enters in a descending passage that repeats and is alternated and combined with similar material in the strings and woodwinds for the next almost eighty measures. From measure 143 to 245, the heart of the movement, the musical material becomes increasingly dissonant, rhythmically complex, and textually dense as additional percussion instruments enter and all four orchestral sections—woodwinds, brass, strings, and percussion—are combined in an almost cacophonous manner, undoubtedly representing the heat of battle, as in the following example (measures 188 to 190).

The image displays a page of musical notation, likely from a symphony or orchestral score. It features multiple staves with complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings. The notation is dense, with many notes and rests. The bottom of the page shows a large chord in measure 241, followed by a section of the score where the music fades out, with various instruments marked 'col legno' and 'pizz.'

After climaxing with a large chord in measure 241, the cacophony quickly fades away, to be replaced by an almost unaccompanied bassoon solo in measures 246 to 249. The penultimate two measures contain a brief final statement from the brass section, with “Björn að baki Kára” ending on the downbeat of measure 252 with a single *pizzicato* eighth-note G, played *pianissimo*, in the contrabass.

### Glámr og Grettir (Intermezzo)

In addition to its programmatic content, Jón Leifs only symphony breaks from tradition due to his insertion of an "Intermezzo" movement, titled "Glámr og Grettir," which follows the third-movement Scherzo. Further, the movement's programmatic material—the confrontation between the ghost of Glámr and the warrior outlaw Grettir Asmundarson—strays a bit from that of the other four movements of *Sögusinfónían* as it was partially inspired by the poetry of Matthías Jochumsson (1835-1920). Nevertheless, much of Leifs's inspiration, as well as that of Jochumsson, came from the saga author's account of the struggle—reminiscent of that between Beowulf and Grendel in the Old English epic *Beowulf*—as found in Chapter 35 of "Grettis saga":

The day passed, and at bedtime Grettir did not get undressed, but lay down on the bench facing the farmer's *bed closet*. He covered himself with a shaggy fur cloak, tucking one end under his feet and the other behind his head, so that he could see out through the opening at the neck. In front of the seat was a very strong bed frame, and he braced his feet against it. The frame had been smashed right away from the door to the house and some makeshift boards had been put in its place. The partition which had separated the hall from the entrance way had been broken away, too, both above and below the crossbeam. All the beds had been shifted and the place was hardly fit for habitation. A light was left burning in the living-room that night.

About one-third of the way through the night, Grettir heard a great din outside. Something climbed up onto the houses and sat astride the roof of the hall, kicking against it with its heels so that every piece of timber in the house creaked. This went on for a long time. Then it climbed down from the roof and went to the door. When the door opened, Grettir watched the wretch stick its head inside, which looked hideously big with grotesque features. Glam moved slowly and stood up straight once he was through the door. He towered up to the rafters, turned to the hall, rested his arm on the crossbeam and glowered inside. The farmer did not make a sound, for he had already had quite enough just hearing what went on outside. Grettir lay there, completely still.

When Glam noticed something lying in a heap on the seat, he moved along inside the hall and gave the cloak a sharp tug. Grettir braced his feet against the bed-frame, and did not yield. Glam yanked

at it again, much harder, yet the cloak still would not budge. The third time he tugged so hard with both hands that he sat Grettir up on the bench, and they ripped the cloak in two between them. Glam looked at the strip he was left holding, astonished that someone could tug so hard against him. At that moment Grettir ducked under Glam's arms and clutched him around the waist, squeezing against his backbone with all his might in the hope of toppling him. But the wretch gripped Grettir's arms so tightly that he was forced to yield his grip. Grettir backed away into one seat after another. All the benches were torn loose and everything in their way was smashed. Glam tried to make it to the door, while Grettir struggled for a foothold. Eventually Glam managed to drag him out of the hall. A mighty fight ensued, because the wretch intended to take him outside the farmhouse. But difficult as Glam was to deal with indoors, Grettir saw he would be even harder to handle outdoors, so he struggled with all his might to keep from going out. Glam's strength redoubled and he clutched Grettir towards him when they reached the entrance hall. When Grettir realised that he could not hold him back, in a single move he suddenly thrust himself as hard as he could into the wretch's arms and pressed both feet against a rock that was buried in the ground at the doorway. The wretch was caught unawares, and as he had been straining to pull Grettir towards him, Glam tumbled over backwards and crashed through the door. His shoulders took the door-frame with him and the rafters were torn apart, the wooden roofing and the frozen turf on it, and Glam fell out of the house onto his back, face upwards, with Grettir on top of him. The moon was shining strongly but thick patches of clouds covered and uncovered it in turns.

Just as Glam fell, the clouds drifted away from the moon and Glam glared up at it. Grettir himself has said that this was the only sight that ever unnerved him. Suddenly Grettir's strength deserted him, from exhaustion and also because of the fierce way Glam was rolling his eyes and, unable to draw his sword, he lay there on the brink of death.

Glam was endowed with more evil force than most other ghosts, as he spoke these words: "You have gone to great lengths to confront me, Grettir," he said, "and it won't seem surprising if you do not earn much good fortune from me. I can tell you that you have attained half the strength and manhood allotted to you had you not encountered me. I cannot take away from you the strength you have already achieved, but I can ordain that you will never become any stronger than you are now, strong enough as you may be, as many people will find out to their cost. You have become renowned until now for your deeds, but henceforth outlawry and killings will fall to your lot, and most of your deeds will bring you misfortune and improvidence. You will be made an outlaw and be forced to live alone and outdoors. And this curse I lay on you: my eyes will always be before your sight and this will

make you find it difficult to be alone. And this will lead to your death.”

As the wretch finished saying this, the helplessness that had come upon Grettir wore off. He drew his short-sword, chopped off Glam's head and placed it against the buttocks. Then the farmer came outside, having dressed while Glam delivered his speech; he had not dared to approach until Glam had been felled. Thorhall praised God and thanked Grettir kindly for having overcome this evil spirit. They set to and burnt Glam to ashes, then carried them away in a skin bag and buried them as far away as possible from grazing land or paths. After that they went back home; it was close to dawn by then. Grettir lay down, for he was very stiff.<sup>27</sup>

The mysterious nature of Leifs's music for “Glámr og Grettir,” as well as the movement's *Adagio* marking, is no doubt due largely to Jochumsson's poetic description of Grettir in the darkness as he quietly, but anxiously, awaits the approach of Glámr: “He waits. He listens. He is in suspense . . . .”<sup>28</sup> In fact, despite the violence depicted in the above selection from “Grettis saga,” the foundational material of Leifs's “Glámr og Grettir” movement is remarkably tranquil, albeit rather unnervingly so. Possibly representing the uneasy stillness of night, such material also serves the more technical purpose of providing sustained pedal points, though without any true tonal centers. Interrupting the eerie stillness of this short 123 measure piece, however, are irregularly-occurring *fortissimo* punctuations and several powerful passages of great dissonance and rhythmic complexity. Such material undoubtedly depicts the momentous struggle between the hero and the ghost, represented respectively in Leifs's music by the lower

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<sup>27</sup> “The Saga of Grettir the Strong,” Bernard Scudder, trans., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume II, Viðar Hreinsson, ed. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997) 105-7.

<sup>28</sup> Jochumsson, as quoted by Ragnarsson, 6.

register of the piccolo and the uppermost harmonics of the contrabass, as in the following example (measures 8 to 15).

The image shows a musical score for measures 8 to 15. The staves are labeled on the left: Fl. pic., Fl. gr., Clar., Tuba, Viole., Vcl., and Cb. divisi. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Specific markings include 'ppp' (pianissimo) and 'f' (forte) in the woodwinds and strings, and 'con sordina' (with mutes) for the tuba. The score is written in a standard musical notation style with a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature.

Various elongated pitches—many in the upper register of their respective instrument—are layered and combined irregularly during the opening twenty-seven *pianissimo* measures of “Glámr og Grettir,” with the contrabassoon performing irregularly-spaced *pizzicato* notes in the lower register. A brief and rather static tuba solo occupies measures 11 to 18. Beginning in measure 28, marked *poco a poco un poco accelerando*, this slowly evolving harmonic palette is interrupted a number of times by short, highly-rhythmic outbursts from the full orchestra. The alternation of both of these types of musical material continues until measure 76, after which point the music becomes increasingly agitated and intense until its culmination in measure 98.

As the mood of the opening material returns for the next eleven measures, the tuba returns as well for a solo marked *quasi recitativo*. A final *fortissimo* eighth-note chord occurs on the downbeat of measure 108 in all the orchestral voices save the viola, which instead has a two-measure phrase assigned the instructions *sul ponticelli* and *diminuendo*. Finally, measures 110 to 122, marked *molto tranquillo*, bring “Glámr og Grettir” to a quiet conclusion through the same sort of slowly-evolving harmonies and

*pizzicato* contrabass material with which the movement opened. The closing measure, 123, contains *pizzicato* quarter notes in the cello and contrabass parts on the last two beats, the final one being elongated by a fermata.

### **Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld**

The final movement of Jón Leifs's *Sögusinfónían*, "Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld," is based on the account of the injuring and heroic death of Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld (Thormod Kolbrun's Poet)—the court poet of King Ólaf Haraldsson (St. Ólaf) who also appears in "Óláfs saga Helga" (The Saga of Saint Ólaf) from the *Heimskringla*—as depicted in Chapter 24 of "Fóstbræðra saga":

It is said that Thormod Kolbrun's Poet was wearing a red tunic the day he went to battle, and that he folded up the front of his tunic under his belt and let it hang low behind. One of the king's men asked why he had done that.

Thormod answered, "Because I intend to go farther forwards than backwards."

He was girded with a sword that King Olaf had given him and carried his axe in his hand, but he had no shield. The king asked him why he was not dressed for battle like the other men and why he carried no shield.

"Do you think the men of Trondheim don't know how to fight?" asked the king.

Thormod answered, "They shall discover today that my axe is both my shield and my armour."

Ever will it be remembered and praised how bravely Thormod fought that day. He hacked away with his axe in both hands in the first fray and then, when the head flew from the shaft, he fought with his sword for the whole of the final assault known as Dagshríd. So many men fell at Thormod's hand that naming them all would take far too long. . . . Thormod Kolbrun's Poet was hardly wounded, but so weary he could not fight on. Even so, he chose to stand fast by his companions. That he was unhurt, or barely so, was not due to him protecting himself more than the others. It was because the enemy found it easier to attack anywhere else than where he stood. . . .

Now Thormod was sorely disappointed that he was hardly wounded, and he was steeped in regret — for he believed that the evil he had done had prevented him from dying alongside the king.

So he prayed eagerly to King Olaf to take pity on him, and he spoke out loud on his own, "Will you not, King Olaf, grant me the end you promised? You said you would not forsake me, if it were within your power."

And the next thing he heard was the sound of a bow-string being plucked, and an arrow flew and pierced him deep under his left arm.

He was greatly pleased at being wounded thus and said, "This man has drawn a more auspicious bow than any other and struck where it was most deserved."

Then Thormod went over to the king's body, sat down beside it and broke the shaft from his axe. . . .

Naturally, Thomod was in great pain from his injury. He walked towards the camp, coming to a barley barn where the wounded among King Olaf's party had been placed. . . .

[A] woman came into the barn with two pails of milk to give the wounded men a drink. She said to Thormod, "Who is this who stands by the wicker wall?"

He answered, "My name is Thormod."

She said, "Have you been at the battle today?"

Thormod answered, "I would like some of these yeoman to go home to their wives tonight and tell them that Thormod Kolbrun's Poet had been at the battle today, but I doubt that many of them will be able to."

The woman said, "Who was the bravest among the king's men?"

Thormod spoke a verse:

Battle-glad Harald fought  
fiercely alongside Olaf.  
Hring and Dag, too, made  
hard play with their swords.  
Those four kings stood with courage  
bearing their red shields.  
Then the carrion fowl  
had dark ale to drink.

The woman said, "You must be badly wounded. Will you have some milk to drink? It gives strength to the wounded."

Thormod answered, "I don't need to drink milk; I am as full as if I had just eaten some Icelandic curds, and I'm not badly wounded."

The woman said, "If you're so little hurt, then why are you so pale?"

Thormod spoke a verse:

The oak of the hawk's perch wonders  
why we were so pale and wan.  
Few are made fair by wounds.

Woman, I felt the rain of arrows,  
 their dark metal drove through  
 my body with great force.  
 Sharp and dangerous iron bit  
 close to my heart, I expect.

The woman said, "I thought you were wounded because you look so pale. Now have your wounds bound like the other men, and let me attend to them.

Then he sat down and took off his tunic. When the healing-woman saw the wound in his side she suspected that he had been struck by an arrow, but she could not see which way the iron head of the arrow was turned in the wound. She had been boiling some onions and herbs together in a stone pot, which she gave the wounded men – if their wounds were deep they emitted the smell of the onions. She brought some gruel to Thormod and asked him to eat.

He answered, "Take it away, I have nothing that herbs will cure."

Then she took a pair of tongs and tried to pull out the arrowhead, but it was stuck fast and she could not move it. Only part of it showed because the wound was so swollen.

Then Thormod said, "Cut to the arrowhead so that it is easier to reach with the tongs, then give them to me and let me pull it out."

She did so. Then Thormod took the gold ring from his hand and gave it to the healing woman, and bade her to do as she wished with it.

"The gift is good," said Thormod. "King Olaf gave me the ring this morning."

Then Thormod took the tongs and pulled at the arrowhead, but it was barbed and the barbs lay on the nerves of his heart, some of which were red and others white, yellow and green.

And when Thormod saw this, he said, "The king has nourished us well. The roots of this man's heart are white."

Then he spoke a verse:

My cheeks are not red, yet she,  
 the hawk's rest bright and slim,  
 has a hale man; few  
 tend to my wounds.  
 Something else makes me look pale,  
 foe to the troll's beaten gold:  
 deep marks from Danish swords  
 at Dagshrid are –

When he had thus spoken, he breathed his last standing by the wicker wall and fell not to the ground until he was dead. King Harald Sigurdsson completed the verse that Thormod had composed.

“‘At Dagshrid are full sore’,” he said; “that’s how the poet would have wanted it to end.”<sup>29</sup>

Despite being the second longest movement of *Sögusinfónían*, “Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld” is rather straightforward and, though internally repetitive, less sectional than “Skarphéðinn,” though no less deserving of a thorough analysis. Marked *Allegro moderato e commodo*, the vast majority of the movement is of a martial character and, despite Ragnarsson’s assertion that it was inspired by the “heroic death of the poet Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld in the battle at Stiklestad in Norway,” contains just a few short inner sections that are more sedate in nature. The most notable feature of “Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld,” aside from its highly agitated musical content, is the sheer size of its orchestral resources. In addition to a full contingent of woodwinds, brass, and strings, the final movement of *Sögusinfónían* includes parts for an ocarina, six *lurs*, and the most massive percussion section required in the symphony.

**Measures 1 to 16.** “Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld” opens with the strings, woodwinds, and horns performing material of an almost Haydnesque elegance. The simple, but exceptionally important motif—a quarter note usually descending an interval of a fourth or fifth to two staccato quarter notes of the same pitch—is also established and presented several times in this passage.

**Measures 17 to 20.** Over a sustained A-sharp in the strings, the opening material is briefly presented again by the full woodwinds, with the further establishment of the movement’s principal motif, as in the following example (measures 17 to 20).

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<sup>29</sup> Excerpts from the *Flateyjarbók* ending of “Fóstbræðra saga,” as found in “The Saga of the Sworn Brothers,” Martin S. Regal, trans., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume II, Viðar Hreinsson, ed. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997) 397-402.



**Measures 21 to 25.** This short passage, featuring the full brass, serves to lead into the next section and gives the first indication of the movement's bellicose nature.

**Measures 26 to 50.** Though not requiring the full orchestral resources that will later be called upon, this twenty-five measure passage presents almost all of the martial material that will be developed fully later in the movement. Among this rhythmically elaborate and fairly syncopated material—in which there are numerous metrical shifts—is a measure-long ascending tremolo in the upper woodwinds (measure 33) and a heavily-accented *martellato* passage in the woodwinds and strings (measures 40 to 41).

**Measures 50 to 100.** Over a rather solid foundation of fairly consonant chordal material in the strings is presented solos for the tuba, viola, flute, clarinet, and bassoon, during which the movement's motif is referenced several times.

**Measures 101 to 109.** As the final chord of the previous section, marked *morendo*, fades away, there is a temporary change of mood as the strings present a short and rather tense passage possibly meant to represent Þormóður's fatal wounding.

**Measures 110 to 118.** A short brass fanfare and chorale, accompanied by rhythmic material in the woodwinds and strings, serves to usher in the next section.

**Measures 119 to 195.** Though not yet requiring the full orchestra, nor as complex as the development section that is yet to come, these measures elaborate on the rhythmic and syncopated material first presented in measures 26 to 50, including several

occurrences of the ascending woodwind tremolo (measures 127, 171, and 178) and a single occurrence of the heavily-accented *martellato* passage (measures 184 to 185).

**Measures 195 to 243.** This lengthy but buoyant section is built almost entirely of countless repetitions of the movement's principal motif both in its original form and inverted. As it is passed from section to section of the orchestra, the three-note motif is also presented numerous times in solos by the tuba, flute, clarinet, and bassoon.

**Measures 244 to 254.** The same sort of material first presented in measures 101 to 109 is again presented here, but with the addition of woodwinds.

**Measures 255 to 258.** Marked *molto tranquillo*, these few measures include a brief solo for ocarina accompanied by *planissimo* chordal material in the strings.

**Measures 259 to 266.** The full orchestra, augmented by an anvil in the percussion, presents a short *maestoso*, *molto energico* introduction to the next section.

**Measures 266 to 282.** After two measures of eighth notes in the strings, the six *lurs*—in pairs of F, E-flat, and D-flat—make their entrance with a brief fanfare alternated twice with chromatically descending *fortissimo* lines in the woodwinds and strings.

**Measures 283 to 324.** The *lurs* entered into the equation, the full orchestra—including a massive percussion section of timpani, bass drum, vibraphone, rocks, shields, anvil, and other instruments—elaborate fully and completely at the *fortissimo* level on the rhythmic and syncopated material last presented in measures 119 to 195, as may be seen in the following example (measures 316 to 319).

The image shows a page of a musical score, specifically measures 325 to 327. The score is written for a large ensemble, including voices and various instruments. The staves are arranged in a block, with the vocal parts (Luri) at the top and the instrumental parts below. The music is characterized by a short fanfare performed by the lurs, which separates the previous section from the subsequent section. The score is written in a standard musical notation, with notes, rests, and other musical symbols. A large number 325 is circled at the bottom center of the page.

**Measures 325 to 327.** A short fanfare, performed by the *lurs*, separates the previous section from the subsequent section.

**Measures 328 to 339.** The climax and perhaps most agitated section of the entire symphony, these twelve measures feature the heavily-accented *martellato* material fully developed, presented by all four sections of the orchestra, as well as the *lurs*, and expanded to nearly five times its original length, as in the following example (measures 332 to 334).

The image shows a page of a musical score, measures 340 to 353. The score is written for a large orchestra and includes parts for woodwinds, strings, and percussion. The notation is dense, with many notes and rests. The page is numbered 137 at the top center.

Measures 340 to 353. Following the fading away of *martellato* material in measure 339, the final fourteen measures of “Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld” consist of fairly sedate *pianissimo* material in the strings, punctuated in measure 345 by two *fortissimo* eighth-note chords on the first beat of the measure. Following a few more measures of solo material for the *lurs*, the bassoon makes its final appearance as a solo instrument in the symphony with a four-beat descending phrase in measures 349 to 350. The movement’s, and by extension symphony’s, two penultimate measures feature one last

*fortissimo* chord and eighth-note punctuation in the woodwinds, brass, and strings, with the final measure containing two *pizzicato* eighth notes, both on the pitch of  $F^2$ , in the lower strings.

CHAPTER 7  
*GUÐRÚNARKVIÐA, HELGA KVIÐA HUNDINGSBANA, AND GRÓGALDR*

Throughout the course of his career, Jón Leifs gave the human voice a prominent place in his music. In fact, of his major orchestral works, only a small handful are without parts for voice, the most notable of such scores being *Sögusinfónían*. On the other hand, vocal parts play a major role in such orchestral works as *Minni Íslands*, *Baldr*, *Hekla*, and *Dettifoss*. In addition, Leifs contributed to nearly every modern vocal genre—including that of the art song, a *cappella* choir, cantata, and oratorio—with the exception of opera. The majority of his vocal scores set the verse of such Icelandic poets as Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-45) and Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940), though he also turned to Nordic myth and legend, particularly the Icelandic sagas and *Poetic Edda*, for textual material on a number of occasions.

From the Icelandic sagas come such works as *Þrjú söngvar úr Íslendingasögum*, op. 24 (Three Songs from Icelandic Sagas; 1941) and *Darraðarljóð*, op. 60 (Song of Dorrud; 1964). While the former is a set of three art songs for solo voice and piano, the latter is a single-movement score for choir and orchestra, similar in style to the contemporary *Hafis* and *Dettifoss*, setting text from “Njál’s Saga.” Among Leifs’s vocal works that include librettos drawn directly from the *Poetic Edda*, meanwhile, are the *Þrjú erindi úr Hávamálum*, op. 4 (Three Verses from Hávamál; 1924) and *Ástarvísur úr Eddu*, op. 18b (Love Verses from the Edda; 1932)—both scored for solo voice and piano—as

well as his three massive *Edda* oratorios. Concerning the composer's attraction to the *Poetic Edda*, Ingólfsson writes:

Leifs was repeatedly inspired by Eddic poetry . . . [and] was a strong advocate of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century "renaissance" of Nordic culture, which he believed could be based on a renewed appreciation for Old Icelandic literature. In many ways, he viewed his own work as a musical continuation of Iceland's ancient literary epics.<sup>1</sup>

Aside from the *Edda* oratorios, Leifs's three most important vocal scores setting text from the *Poetic Edda*—selected in each case by the composer himself—are the single-movement cantatas *Guðrúnarkviða*, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, and *Grógaldur*. Of these works, only the first was performed during the composer's lifetime—at its premiere on September 29, 1948, by the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. The Reykjavík Chamber Orchestra premiered *Helga kviða Hundingsbana* and *Grógaldur*, while also giving the second performance of *Guðrúnarkviða*, on May 1, 1999.

The remainder of this chapter will focus in greater detail on these three cantatas, with the most attention being deservedly paid to *Grógaldur*. Included in this discussion are three tables, each of which provides the complete libretto—both in the original Icelandic and English—for its respective cantata. The specific location of each verse in the *Poetic Edda*, as well as in the cantatas, is also provided. Finally, these tables show to which vocalist(s) each verse is assigned, with first entrances appearing in capital letters. It should be noted, however, that several of the passages labeled as solos actually contain voice doublings on specific words or phrases for dramatic purposes. These passages have been listed as solos, nonetheless, to distinguish them from full-fledged duets.

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<sup>1</sup> Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, liner notes for *Jón Leifs* (ITM: 9-01, 1999) 15.

*Guðrúnarkviða*, op. 22 (The Lay of Guðrun; 1940)

Jón Leifs wrote the first of his three *Edda*-based cantatas, *Guðrúnarkviða*, about two years before *Sögusinfónían*, but with the same purpose in mind—to glorify his Nordic heritage as an act of defiance against the Third Reich. He began composing the work on April 9, 1940, the exact day German troops invaded Norway, completing it just a few weeks later.<sup>2</sup> As for the genesis and dedication of the work, Leifs wrote, “For 20 years I had been planning a composition to the *Lay of Gudrun*, but it was this event, so distressing for the Icelandic people, that made me realize my plans. The piece was composed in honour of the unknown Norwegian soldier.”<sup>3</sup>

Leifs’s dedication is fitting as the score deals with the loss of a great hero, the legendary Norse warrior Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer. The central figure of the cantata, however, is Guðrún—“the quintessential tragic heroine, both the witness to, and the cause of, countless deaths of those connected to her by blood or marriage”—as found in the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>4</sup> In constructing his elaborate libretto, Leifs selected passages from four different, but related, Eddic poems dealing with Guðrún: “Guðrúnarkviða I” (The First Lay of Gudrun), “Guðrúnarkviða II” (The Second Lay Of Gudrun), “Hamðismál” (The Lay of Hamdir), and “Guðrúnarhvöt” (Gudrun’s Lament).

“Guðrúnarkviða I” and “Guðrúnarkviða II” both tell of the heroine’s lamentation for her dead husband, Sigurd. Interestingly, the first lay, or “lament,” is the younger of the two, having probably been composed in the twelfth century. The second lay, on the

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<sup>2</sup> Ingólfsson, 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> Jón Leifs as quoted by Ingólfsson, 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (London: Cassell, 1998) 64.

other hand, is one of the oldest poems found in the *Poetic Edda*, dating from perhaps the early tenth century. Despite internal inconsistencies and fragmentation, “Guðrúnarkviða II” is also one of the most important Eddic poems: “In this lay we may recognize the prototype of the various other ‘laments’ of the Collection. . . . [It] contains, in organic connection, the themes from which most of the other lays are derived.”<sup>5</sup> The tenth-century “Hamðismál” is also rather fragmentary in nature, but nonetheless serves as one of the most dramatic examples of Eddic poetry, telling the fate of Guðrún’s sons Hamdir and Sorli. Finally, “Guðrúnarhvöt,” from the eleventh century, is yet another sorrowful lament of the tragic Norse heroine.

The first half of the cantata is primarily narrative, telling of the sorrow of the noblewoman Guðrún at the loss of her beloved husband, Sigurd. Though other noblewomen—including Herborg, Queen of the Huns—try to console her with their own tales of woe, Guðrún’s grief is so great that she is unable to cry or lament until she actually looks upon the blood-soaked face of Sigurd. At this point, the second half of the cantata begins, with the previous narrative style giving way to a long soliloquy in which Guðrún’s voice pours forth her sorrow and pain. Table 1 provides the complete libretto of the work.

*Guðrúnarkviða* is scored for mezzo-soprano, tenor, bass, and orchestra, the latter consisting of piccolo, flute, oboe, *cor anglais* in F, clarinet in B-flat, bassoon, two horns in F, trumpet in B-flat, trombone, strings, timpani, and percussion. Labeled *Andante con moto*, the cantata contains both percussive and lyrical passages—though those of the

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<sup>5</sup> Lee M. Hollander, *The Poetic Edda*, Revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962/90) 269.

Table 1: Libretto to *Guðrúnarkviða*, op. 22

| Poem   | Stanza | Measures    | Voice(s)        | Icelandic Text (libretto)   | English Text (translation) <sup>6</sup>  |
|--|--------|-------------|-----------------|---|--|
| "Guðrúnarkviða I"<br>(The First Lay of Guðrún) | -<br>1 | 4-7<br>8-15 | BASS:<br>TENOR: | Guðrún sat yfir Sigurði dauðum.<br>Ár var, þats Guðrún<br>gerðisk at deyja,<br>er hon sat sorgfull<br>of Sigurði;<br>gerðit hjófra<br>né höndum sláa,<br>né kveina um<br>sem konur aðrar. | <i>Guðrún sat over Sigurd's dead body.</i><br>It was long ago that Guðrún intended to die,<br>when she sat sorrowful over Sigurd.                                |
|  |        | 16-22       | Duet:           |   | She did not weep or strike her hands together,<br>or lament like other women.  |
|  | 2      | 25-31       | Duet:           | Gengu jarlar<br>alsnotir fram,<br>þeir er harðs hugar<br>hana löttu.<br>Þeygi Guðrún<br>gráta mátti,<br>svá var hon móðug,<br>mundi springa.  | The very wise warriors stepped forward,<br>they tried to ease her terrible grief.  |
|  |        | 34-40       | Bass:           |   | Even so Guðrún could not weep,<br>she was so impassioned, she might have burst asunder.  |
|  | 3      | 43-54       | Tenor:          | Sátu ítrar<br>jarla bróðir,<br>gulli búnar,<br>fyr Guðrúnu;<br>hver sagði þeira<br>sinn ofrega,<br>þann er bitrastan<br>beðit hafði.  | The gleaming wives of warriors,<br>adorned with gold, sat by Guðrún;<br>each of them told of their great grief,<br>the bitterest which had been visited on them. |

<sup>6</sup> Translation by Carolyn Larrington from *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996/99) 177-79, 196-202, 237, 239. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

Table 1. Continued.

|  |         |        |  |   |
|--|---------|--------|--|---|
| "Guðrúnarkviða I"<br>(The First Lay of Guðrún) |         |        |  |   |
| 5  | 59-68   | Bass:  | Þeygi Guðrún<br>gráta mátti,<br>svá var hon móðug<br>at mög dauðan<br>ok harðhuguð<br>um hrör fylkis.  | Even so Guðrún could not weep;<br>she was so impassioned by the death of the young man<br>and so fierce in mind at the fall of the prince.  |
| 6  | 73-86   | Tenor: | Þá kvað þat Herborg,<br>Húmalands drottning:<br>„Hefi ek harðara<br>harm at segja:<br>minir sjau synir<br>summan lands,<br>verr inn átti<br>í val fellu. | Then said Herborg, queen of the land of the Huns:<br>"I have a heavier grief to speak of:<br>my seven sons, in the lands in the south,<br>my husband, as the eighth, all fell in slaughter. |
| 8:1-2  | 88-93   | Tenor: | Sjálf skyldak göfva,<br>sjálf skyldak götva,<br>sjálf skyldak höndla<br>heilfr þeira."   | "I myself had to honour, I myself had to bury,<br>I myself had to arrange their journey to Hel."  |
| 11   | 96-105  | Bass:  | Þeygi Guðrún<br>gráta mátti,<br>svá var hon móðug<br>at mög dauðan<br>ok harðhuguð<br>um hrör fylkis.  | Even so Guðrún could not weep;<br>she was so impassioned by the death of the young man<br>and so fierce in mind at the fall of the prince.  |
| 1:3-4  | 108-114 | Duet:  | Gerðit hon hjúfra,<br>né höndum sláa,<br>né kveina um,<br>sem konur aðrar.   | She did not weep or strike her hands together,<br>or lament like other women.   |

Table 1. Continued.

| (The First Lay of Gudrun)<br>"Guðrúnarkviða I" |                    |                     |   |  |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|---|--|
| 12   | 121-133            | Tenor:              | Þá kvæð þat Guðrúnd,<br>Gjúka dóttir:<br>„Fá kannu, föstra,<br>þótt fróð séir,<br>ungu vífi<br>andspjöll bera.“<br>Varaði hon at hylja<br>um brór fylkis. | Then said Guðrúnd, daughter of Gjúki:<br>'You don't really know, foster-mother, though you are wise,<br>how to reply to a young wife.'<br>She advised against concealing the corpse of the prince.                     |
| 13   | 134-139<br>140-144 | Duet:<br><br>Tenor: | Svipti blæju<br>af Sigurði<br>ok vatt vengi<br>fyr vífs knéum:<br>„Lit á ljúfan,<br>legg munu við grön,<br>sem halsaðir<br>heilan stilli.“                | She swept the covering from Sigurd<br>and pushed the blood-soaked pillows by the woman's knees:<br><br>'Look at your beloved, put your mouth to his moustache,<br>as you used to embrace the prince when he was alive. |
| 14   | 147-149<br>150-159 | Bass:<br><br>Duet:  | Á leit Guðrún<br>einu sinni,<br>sá dögðlings skór<br>dreyra runna,<br>fránar sjónir<br>fylkis liðnar,<br>hugborg jöfurs<br>hjörvi skorna.                 | Guðrún looked at him one time only:<br><br>She saw the prince's hair running with blood,<br>the bright eyes of the lord grown dim,<br>the prince's breast scored by the sword.   |
| 15   | 162-172            | Tenor:              | Þá hné Guðrún<br>höll við bolstri,<br>hæddr losnaði,<br>hlýr roðnaði,<br>regns dropi<br>rann niðr um kné.   | Then Guðrún knelt, leaning on the pillow;<br>loosened her hair, scratched her cheeks,<br>and drops like rain ran down to her knees.  |

Table 1. Continued.

|   |        |         |        |  |  |
|---|--------|---------|--------|--|--|
| "Guðrúnarkviða I"<br>(The First Lay of Guðrún)      | 16:1-2 | 173-180 | Duet:  | Þá grét Guðrún<br>Gjúka dóttir,<br>svá at tár flugu<br>tresk í gögnum.   | Then Guðrún wept, the daughter of Giuki,<br>so that her tears fell into her hair.  |
|   | 18     | 182-198 | MEZZO: | Svá var minn Sigurðr<br>hjá sonum Gjúka<br>sem væri grænn laukr<br>ór grasi vaxinn,<br>eða væri bjartur steinn<br>á band dreginn,<br>járnasteinn<br>of öðlingum. | 'So was my Sigurd, beside the sons of Giuki,<br>as if a leek were grown up out of the grass,<br>or a bright stone were threaded onto a string,<br>a precious gem, among the nobles.        |
|   | 20     | 201-214 | Mezzo: | Sakna ek, í sessi<br>ok í sæingu<br>mins málvinar;<br>valda megir Gjúka;<br>valda megir Gjúka;<br>minu bölvi<br>ok systir sinnar<br>sárum gráti.                 | I miss in his seat and in my bed<br>my friend to talk to, the kin of Giuki caused it;<br>the kin of Giuki caused my grief<br>and agonizing weeping for their sister.                       |
| "Guðrúnarkviða II"<br>(The Second Lay<br>of Guðrún) | 2      | 218-231 | Mezzo: | Svá bar Sigurðr<br>af sonum Gjúka,<br>sem væri geirlaukr<br>ór grasi vaxinn,<br>eða hjórt hrábeinn<br>um hösnum dýrum,<br>eða gull glóbrautt<br>af gráu silfri.  | So was Sigurd beside the sons of Giuki<br>like a green leek grown up out of the grass,<br>or a high-anterled stag among the sharp-eyed beasts,<br>or red-glowing gold next to dull silver. |

Table 1. Continued.

| "Guðrúnarkviða II"<br>(The Second Lay of Gudrun) |         |        |   |   |
|--|---------|--------|---|---|
| 11:1-4   | 236-248 | Mezzo: | Hvarf ek ein þaðan<br>andspilli frá<br>á við lesa<br>varga leifar;<br>gerðig at hjúfra,<br>né höndum sláa<br>né kveina um<br>sem konur aðrar.       | Away I went from the conversation,<br>to the wood, to gather the leavings of the wolves;<br>I could not weep nor strike my hands together,<br>nor lament as other women do.                   |
| 5  | 252-262 | Mezzo: | Gekk ek grátandi<br>við Grana ræða,<br>úrghlýra<br>jó frá spjalla;<br>hnippaði Grani,<br>drap í gras höfði,<br>jór þat vissi,<br>eigendr né lifðut. | Weeping I went to talk to Grani;<br>cheeks wet with tears, I asked the horse for news;<br>Grani drooped his head then, hid it in the grass,<br>the horse knew that his master was not living. |
| 12:1-4   | 266-276 | Mezzo: | Nótt þótti mér<br>niðmyrkr vera,<br>er sárla sat ek<br>of Sigurði;<br>úlfar þóttumk<br>öllu betra,<br>ef léti mik<br>lífi týna.                     | The night seemed to me as dark as the dark of the moon,<br>as I sat grieving over Sigurd;<br>it seemed to me the best of all things<br>if the wolves took my life.                            |
| 44   | 277-282 | Mezzo: | Lágak síðan,<br>né sofa vildak,<br>þrágjörn í kór,<br>þat man ek görva.   | I lay down then, I did not want to sleep,<br>obstinate in the bed of pain; that I remember well.  |

Table 1. Continued.

|                                       |    |         |        |  |   |
|---------------------------------------|----|---------|--------|--|---|
| "Hamðismál"<br>(The Lay of<br>Hamðir) | 5  | 285-305 | Trio:  | Einstæð em ek orðin<br>sem ösp í holtu,<br>fallin at frændum<br>sem fura at kvisti,<br>vaðin at vilja<br>sem viðr at laufi.<br>Þá er in kvistskæða<br>kómur um dag varman. | 'I have come to stand alone like an aspen in the forest,<br>my kinsmen cut away as a fir's branches,<br>bereft of happiness, as a wood of its leaves,<br>when a girl cutting branches comes on a warm day.' |
| "Gudrunarhvöt"<br>(Gudrun's Lament)   | 20 | 307-328 | Mezzo: | Minnstu, Sigurd,<br>hvat mæltum við,<br>þá er vit á beði<br>bæði sátum,<br>at myndir mín<br>móðugr vitja<br>hvar ór heilju,<br>en ek ór heimi þínu.                        | 'Do you recall, Sigurd, what we promised,<br>when we two lay in bed together,<br>that, brave warrior, you would visit me from hell,<br>and I would come to you from the world.'                             |

former type dominate, as is immediately apparent in the work's opening seventy-measure section. The Icelandic folksong styles of *rímur* and *tvísöngur* are quite apparent in the score—the former resulting in numerous meter shifts throughout the work, the most common being triple, while the latter is manifested through the composer's liberal use of parallel fifths, specifically in several of the vocal duets. The use of third-related harmonies is also an important characteristic of this work, as are the numerous unison passages between the instrumental and vocal parts.

The score commences in triple time with a rather sparse four-measure descending line, consisting of *pizzicato* eighth notes alternating with rests, performed *pianissimo* and in unison by the cello and contrabass. This austere unison accompaniment continues beneath the entrances of both the bass and tenor voices, on the downbeat of measure 4 and 8 respectively. Over the course of the next several measures, most of the woodwinds and the remaining strings are gradually added to the orchestra, climaxing on a *forte* eighth-note chord, built of the pitches F and C, at the beginning of measure 17. This harmonic construction of a bare fifth in the orchestral voices parallels that of the duet between the tenor and bass—"gerðit hjúfra né höndum sláa, né kveina um sem konur aðrar" (She did not weep or strike her hands together, or lament like other women)—that began just a measure earlier and ends in measure 22. This entire vocal passage is made up of a series of parallel fifths, representing the *tvísöngur* style, as in the following example (measures 16 to 22).

The image shows a musical score for two voices, Tenor (Ten.) and Bass (Bass), spanning measures 16 to 22. The music is written in a single system with two staves. The Tenor staff is on top and the Bass staff is on the bottom. The notes are arranged in parallel fifths, which is a characteristic of the *tvísöngur* style. The lyrics are in Icelandic and are written below the staves. The lyrics for the Tenor part are: "gerðit - hjúfra né höndum sláa, né kveina um sem konur aðrar". The lyrics for the Bass part are: "gerðit - hjúfra né höndum sláa, né kveina um sem konur aðrar". The score is in a single system with two staves. The notes are arranged in parallel fifths, which is a characteristic of the *tvísöngur* style. The lyrics are in Icelandic and are written below the staves. The lyrics for the Tenor part are: "gerðit - hjúfra né höndum sláa, né kveina um sem konur aðrar". The lyrics for the Bass part are: "gerðit - hjúfra né höndum sláa, né kveina um sem konur aðrar".

Nearly the same textual and musical material appears three more times in the cantata, thereby reiterating Guðrún's feelings of grief at the loss of Sigurd. They are repeated almost verbatim, as *tvísöngur*, in the tenor/bass duet in measures 108 to 114, and quite similarly in the tenor/bass duet in measures 173 to 180. Later, the upper melody of the original passage, as well as a variation on the text, reappears in measures 242 to 248 in the mezzo-soprano voice, though not in the *tvísöngur* style, but as a solo. Another repeated melody is used to depict grief in the solo bass voice in measures 34 to 39, 59 to 68, and 96 to 105. Each of these three lines opens with the same text—"Þeygi Guðrún gráta mátti, svá var hon móðug" (Even so Gudrun could not weep, she was so impassioned)—and similar musical material, but then diverge in both aspects. In addition to emphasizing grief in the above tenor/bass duets, Leifs occasionally employs *tvísöngur* style to emphasize other concepts. For instance, in measure 46, during a tenor solo, the bass enters briefly on the word "gulli" (gold), thereby stressing the importance of wealth in Viking society.

There is an abrupt change of character in measures 70 to 93. The strings, having hitherto alternated frequently between *pizzicato* and *arco*, rely almost entirely on the latter technique in this section, even receiving the instructions *passionato* and *lamentoso* in measures 78 and 87 respectively. The lyrical nature of the orchestral accompaniment here underpins the tenor's equally lyrical delivery of Queen Herborg's lament. The entire brass section accompanies the opening narrative line—"Þá kvað þat Herborg, Húnalands drottning" (Then said Herborg, queen of the land of the Huns)—giving way to woodwinds for the actual lament. This short section concludes rather dramatically in measure 93 with the words "helför þeira" (their journey to Hel), as in the example below

(measures 91 to 93). On “hel” (realm of the dead), the strings perform *sul ponticello* a fully-diminished *sforzando* seventh chord built on the pitch of A. This is followed on “för” (journey) by a second fully-diminished seventh chord in the strings, built on E, labeled *senza ponticello*, before the tenor voice trails off on the word “þeira” (their).

The image shows a musical score for measures 91-93. The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) are at the top, with lyrics in Old Norse. The orchestral parts (Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello, Double Bass) are below. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *sul ponticello* and *senza ponticello*.

The remainder of the first half of *Guðrúnarkviða*, measures 94 to 180, is quite similar in musical content to the percussive opening section, measures 1 to 70. The next major stylistic change comes abruptly at the beginning of the work's second half, measure 181, which also marks the entrance of the mezzo-soprano as Guðrún. The musical texture at this point is at its most dense, with almost all the resources of the orchestra playing without rest for nearly five full measures. The only instruments silent at this time, surprisingly, are the timpani and tam-tam, which hitherto have been fairly active. In their stead, however, Leifs calls for a piccolo snare and a large piece of wood (*legno grande*). The bulk of the musical material here consists of repetitive descending lines, with trills in the brass, as the mezzo-soprano enters in measure 182 on the word “Svá” (So), which she holds at a *forte* crescendo for three measures. The following example contains the full orchestral score for measures 181 to 184.

Following these few measures, the accompaniment remains somewhat lyrical for the remainder of the piece, though Leifs's liberal use of such techniques as *pizzicato*, *col legno*, and *sul ponticello* in the strings, as well as countless dynamic contrasts, prevents the mood from ever becoming too subdued. The mezzo-soprano's melodies, as well as the aforementioned melodies of the tenor and bass, are fairly disjunct and rarely lyrical. Most of her stanzas, meanwhile, are separated by brief, very lightly-textured orchestral passages. *Tvisöngur* style makes one final appearance near the end of the work, measures 285 to 305, as the mezzo-soprano is joined by the tenor and bass for a short trio.

It is the final few moments of *Guðrúnarkviða*, however, that are the most emotional. In measures 307 to 328, as the mezzo-soprano recalls the love promise of Guðrún and Sigurd—“Minnstu, Sigurðr, hvat mæltum vit, þá er vit á beði bæði sátum, at myndir mín móðugr vitja halr ór helju, en ek ór heimi þín” (Do you recall, Sigurd, what we promised, when we two lay in bed together, that, brave warrior, you would visit me from hell, and I would come to you from the world)—the accompaniment takes on a reverent and almost meditative character, lending to the serious and solemn nature of the text. This passage, labeled *un poco con moto*, as well as the cantata, ends with the soloist delivering a haunting five-measure vocalization—ascending an octave and a half from C-flat to G-flat—on the word “þín” (you), accompanied only by the strings, clarinet, and bassoon—her voice rising to the heavens as Sigurd’s soul to the afterlife.

***Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, op. 61 (The Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer; 1964)**

Nearly twenty-five years passed after the completion of *Guðrúnarkviða* before Jón Leifs wrote another cantata setting text from the *Poetic Edda*. In the meantime, however, he completed several additional works based on Nordic myth and legend, including *Sögusinfónían* and *Baldr*. Of these, as well as his other orchestral scores that incorporate material from the Nordic epics and sagas, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana* is perhaps the least ambitious. Completed in the autumn of 1964, just a few weeks after the unsuccessful premiere of *Hekla* in Helsinki, the cantata is a fairly short and somewhat uncomplicated work, though more mature in some aspects than *Guðrúnarkviða*.

The entire libretto of *Helga kviða Hundingsbana* is derived from seven consecutive stanzas of the fragmented tenth-century poem “Helga kviða Hundingsbana II” (The Second Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer), as found in the *Poetic Edda*. The

poem tells of how Helgi, the half brother of Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer, slays King Hunding and his four sons, thereby receiving his name. He then wins the hand and heart of a Valkyrie, Sigrún, by killing her unwanted suitor, though in the process killing her father and brother as well. These latter deaths are soon avenged by Sigrún's other brother, however, through the use of a spear given to him by Odin. During the final few stanzas, Sigrún visits the burial mound of her dead husband, Helgi, where they are granted one last night together before he enters Valhalla. It is this last section of "Helga kviða Hundingsbana II" that Leifs chose to set in *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, as illustrated in Table 2.

*Helga kviða Hundingsbana* is scored for alto and bass soloists, as well as an orchestra of piccolo, flute, *cor anglais* in F, clarinet in A, bass clarinet in B-flat, bassoon, contrabassoon, two horns in F, trumpet in C, trombone, tuba, strings, timpani, and percussion. Despite this large instrumental contingent, the orchestra's role is almost entirely accompanimental in nature—with one notable exception—either doubling the vocal solos or merely providing them with a homophonic backdrop. The large wind section, however, adds a good deal of color to the work.

Like *Guðrúnarkviða*, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana* is in no set tonality, though the opening and closing material is a parallel fifth A/E. Regularly shifting meters, as in *rímur*, are again present, with duple and triple meters being prevalent. Nevertheless, various aspects of this score demonstrate it to be clearly more mature than the earlier cantata. For instance, more varied are the dynamics, which range from *pianississimo* (*pppp*) to *triple forte* (*fff*), and include frequent crescendos and decrescendos, as well as

Table 2: Libretto to *Helga kvíða Hundingsbana*, op. 61

| Poem   | Stanza | Measure(s)     | Voice(s)       | Icelandic Text (libretto)   | English Text (translation) <sup>7</sup>   |
|--|--------|----------------|----------------|---|---|
| "Helga kvíða Hundingsbana II"<br>(Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani) | 43     | 13-17<br>18-36 | BASS:<br>ALTO: | <i>Sigrún gekk í hauginn til Helga ok kvad:</i><br>Nú em ek svá fegin<br>fundi okkrum<br>sem átfrekir<br>Óðins haukar,<br>er vals viti<br>varmar bráðir,<br>eða dögglitir<br>dagsbrun sea.  | <i>Sigrún went into the mound to Helgi and said:</i><br><br>'Now I am so glad, at our meeting,<br>as are the greedy hawks of Odin<br>when they know of slaughter, steaming food,<br>or, dew-drenched, they see the dawn.  |
|  | 44     | 37-65          | Alto:          | Fyr vil ek kyssa<br>konung ólífðan<br>en þú blóðugri<br>brynju kastir,<br>hár er þitt, Helgi,<br>hélu þrungið,<br>alir er visi<br>valdögg sleginn,<br>hendr úrvalar,<br>Högnu mági,<br>hve skal ek þér, buðlungr,<br>þess bót of vinna. | First I want to kiss the lifeless king,<br>before you throw off your bloody mail-coat;<br>your hair, Helgi, is thick with hoar-frost,<br>the prince is all soaked in slaughter-dew,<br>Hogni's son-in-law has clammy hands.<br>How, lord can I find a remedy for this?' |

<sup>7</sup> Translation by Carolyn Larrington from *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996/99) 139-140. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

Table 2. Continued.

| "Helga kviða Hundingsbana II"<br>(Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani) |         |       |   |   |
|--|---------|-------|---|---|
| 45   | 66-89   | Bass: | Ein veldr þú, Sigrún<br>frá Sevafröllum,<br>er Helgi er<br>harmdög sleginn;<br>grætr þú, gullvarði,<br>grimmum tárum,<br>sölbjört, subræn,<br>áðr þú sofa gangir,<br>hvert feltr blóðugt<br>á brjóst grami,<br>úrsvalt, innfjalgt,<br>ekka þrungit. | 'You alone, Sigrún, from Seváfell,<br>cause Helgi to be soaked in sorrow-dew;<br>you weep, gold-adorned lady, bitter tears,<br>sun-bright southern girl, before you go to sleep;<br>each falls bloody on the breast of the prince,<br>cold as dew, burning hot, thick with grief. |
| 46   | 91-117  | Bass: | Vel skulum drekka<br>dýrar veigar,<br>þótt misst hafim<br>munar ok landa;<br>skal engi maðr<br>angrjóðr kveða<br>þótt mér í brjósti<br>benjar líti.<br>Nú eru brúðir<br>byrgðar í haugi,<br>lofða ódir<br>hjá líðnum oss.                           | We ought to drink this precious liquid,<br>though we have lost our love and our lands;<br>no man should sing a lament for me,<br>though on my breast wounds can be seen;<br>now the lady is enclosed in the mound,<br>a human woman with us, the departed.'                       |
| 47   | 121-140 | Alto: | Hér hefi ek þér, Helgi,<br>hvílu görva,<br>angrausa mjök,<br>Yfinga niðr:<br>vil ek þér í faðmi,<br>fylkir, sofna<br>sem ek lofðungi<br>lífnun myndak.  | 'Here I've made you, Helgi, a bed all ready;<br>descendant of the Yifings, now free from care<br>in your arms, lord, I'll sleep,<br>as I would with the prince, when he was living.'  |

Table 2. Continued.

|  |    |         |       |  |   |
|--|----|---------|-------|--|---|
| <p>“Helga kvíða Hundingsbana II”<br/>(Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani)</p> | 48 | 143-164 | Bass: | <p>Nú kveð ek einskis<br/>örvænt vera<br/>sð né snemma<br/>at Sevaðöllum,<br/>er þú á armi<br/>ólíðum sefr,<br/>hvít, í haugi,<br/>Högn dóttr,<br/>ok eru kvik<br/>in konungborna.</p> | <p>‘I say that nothing could be less expected,<br/>neither early nor late at Sefafell,<br/>that you should sleep in the arms of a dead man,<br/>white lady, in the tomb, Högni’s daughter,<br/>and you alive, and royally born.</p> |
|  | 49 | 190-211 | Bass: | <p>Mál er mér at ríða<br/>roðnar brautir,<br/>láta fólvan jó<br/>flugstíg troða,<br/>skal ek fyr vestan<br/>vindhjálms brúar<br/>áðr Salgoðfir<br/>sigrþjóð vekl.</p>                  | <p>It is time for me to ride along the blood-red roads,<br/>to set the pale horse to tread the path in the sky;<br/>I must cross the bridge in the sky-vault,<br/>before Salgoðfir awakens the victorious people.’</p>              |

such demands as *pianissimo sforzando pianissimo* (*ppp sf ppp*). Further, string techniques run the gamut, while *glissandos* and muted passages exist in the wind parts.

Though certainly not the cantata's only melodic material, two simple motifs occur frequently enough to warrant mention. The first motif consists of descending groups of disjunct notes and the second of repeated staccato or otherwise-accented pitches. At several points, these two motifs are combined, creating accented disjunct melodic descents. Harmonically, the parallel fifths of *tvísöngur*, as well as thirds, are commonplace in this score. However, as it contains no duets between the two solo voices, the *tvísöngur* technique relies completely on the instrumental accompaniment, though the fifths often occur in conjunction with one of the solo voices.

The bulk of musical material in the first half of *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*—following a subdued twelve-measure orchestral introduction, in quadruple time, consisting of parallel fifths and thirds primarily in whole notes—is rather straightforward. Labeled *Andante*, these one-hundred and five measures take full advantage of the aforementioned melodic techniques in both vocal lines, combined with *tvísöngur* harmonies in the accompaniment, as in the following example (measures 31–40).

The image shows a page of a musical score for measures 31–40. The score is written for a vocal ensemble (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a full orchestra (Piano, Violins I & II, Violas, Cellos, Double Basses). The music is in quadruple time and labeled *Andante*. The score features parallel fifths and thirds, primarily in whole notes, and includes the *tvísöngur* technique. A box labeled 'A' highlights a specific section of the score.

The second half of *Helga kviða Hundingsbana* begins in measure 106, two-thirds of the way through the bass soloist's delivery of stanza forty-six, on the line "Nú eru brúðir byrgðar í haugi, lofða dísir hjá liðnum oss" (Now the lady is enclosed in the mound, a human woman with us, the departed). Though the prevalent mood of the cantata, given its subject matter, has been rather somber since the start, Helgi and Sigrún's discussion of death and burial during the next two-and-a-half stanzas of text serves to intensify this emotion. Labeled *tranquillo*, the stylistic change at this point is somewhat abrupt, offsetting the more percussive nature of the cantata's first half with a wealth of slow-moving, richly chromatic lyricism in both the bass and alto voice, as well as the *tvisöngur*-based accompaniment, for the next 58 measures. Further, though presented in a more expressive fashion than in the cantata's first half, much of this passage's melodic material continues to be built of the aforementioned first motif, while the accented notes of the second motif are practically nonexistent until the last few bars.

Just as the bass soloist is beginning to reestablish the earlier lighter mood, however, his delivery of stanza forty-eight comes to a sudden conclusion. What follows is a short, though powerful, orchestral interlude that is basically nothing more than a series of glissandos and crescendos in almost all the instrumental parts, leading rather cacophonously to the bass soloist's presentation of Helgi's final stanza. The following example is a ten measure excerpt (174 to 183) from this twenty-five measure section.

The final section of *Helga kviða Hundingsbana* begins in measure 190, immediately on the heels of the orchestral interlude, with the title character proudly describing his imminent journey to Valhalla, the realm of dead heroes: “Mál er mér at ríða roðnar brautir” (It is time for me to ride along the blood-red roads). Starting with an *Allegro* marking, but accelerating into the final few *Maestoso* measures of the cantata through the composer’s indication *poco a poco più stringendo*, this powerful passage contrasts with every other section of the score. Nevertheless, the same melodic and harmonic constructions from earlier in the cantata remain prevalent, though cast in an

entirely different light. Here, the solemnity of a husband's death is replaced by the nobility of a hero's afterlife as the music fades quickly from *fortissimo* to *pianississimo*, on the word "veki" (awakens), over the course of the last five measures.

***Grógaldur*, op. 62 (The Spell of Gróa; 1965)**

The final cantata in which Jón Leifs set text directly from the *Poetic Edda*, and that which warrants the most attention, is *Grógaldur*. Though composed less than a year after *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*—during the spring of 1965—*Grógaldur* is a decidedly more complex, mature, and exhilarating score, despite some similarities to its predecessor. Further, of the three cantatas discussed in this study, *Grógaldur* most fluently proclaims, in no uncertain terms, the essence of Leifs' compositional style. It is a demanding work, for both the performers and the listeners, but also quite rewarding. It worthily stands alongside *Sögusinfónían*, *Baldr*, *Hekla*, *Dettifoss*, and the three *Edda* oratorios as one of the composer's true masterpieces.

Though all three of Leifs's *Edda*-based cantatas have death, as well as burial, as an important theme, the overall mood of *Grógaldur* is noticeably different than that of the two earlier scores. Rather than sorrow and lamentation, *Grógaldur* is concerned with the preservation of life, the power of archaic beliefs, and the loving relationship between mother and son. Leifs's libretto consists of the entire poem "Grógaldur," which is the first half of "Svipdagsmál" (The Lay of Svipdag), from the *Poetic Edda*. Dating from the tenth century, *Grógaldur* concerns the young hero Svipdag and his quest to win the hand of his beloved Mengloth, who is being held captive by Fjölsvinn the giant. In order to complete this quest, which was assigned to him by his evil stepmother, Svipdag visits the grave of his mother, Gróa, seeking advice. Gróa, out of great love and concern for her

son, casts nine powerful spells of protection to aid Svipdag, urging him to heed her words well. Table 3 contains the complete libretto of *Grógaldr*.

*Grógaldr* is scored for alto and tenor soloists, representing Gróa and Svipdag respectively, as well as an orchestra of piccolo, flute, oboe, *cor anglais*, clarinet in B-flat, bass clarinet in B-flat, bassoon, contrabassoon, two horns in F, two trumpets in C, three trombones, tuba, strings, timpani, and percussion. Immediately apparent from this instrumental inventory is the larger number of brass required for *Grógaldr* than for either *Guðrúnarkviða* or *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*. Further, the size of Leifs's percussion section for *Grógaldr* far exceeds that for either of the earlier cantatas. Among the percussion instruments demanded are chime in G, triangle, crash cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, a large stone (*pietri grande*), a large piece of wood (*legno grande*), and perhaps most unique, a metal *scudi* (shield).

The instrumental parts of *Grógaldr* tend to be in unison with the vocal parts, as in *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, though perhaps less strictly. The melodic material is somewhat repetitive and features two recurring motifs, one of which is the descending pattern found in *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*. Timbral effects are quite important, made even more so here than in the previous work by the additional brass and percussion, with string techniques being quite plentiful. All of the aforementioned aspects of Icelandic folksong are present, including the use of parallel fifths, as in *tvísöngur*, and shifting meters, as in *rímur*, though triple meter is most common. The dynamics, meanwhile, are quite varied and include a number of such markings as *mezzo piano*—*sforzando*—*pianissimo* followed immediately by a crescendo to *mezzo forte* (*mp sf pp cresc. - - - mf*), all of which occur over the course of two measures. Changes of mood in *Grógaldr*,

Table 3: Libretto to *Grógaldur*, op. 62

| Poem                               | Stanza | Mensura(s) | Voice(s) | Icelandic Text (libretto)   | English Text (translation) <sup>8</sup>   |
|------------------------------------|--------|------------|----------|---|---|
| "Grógaldur"<br>(The Spell of Gróa) | 1      | 4-25       | TENOR:   | Vaki þú, Gróa,<br>vaki þú, góð kona,<br>vek ek þik dauðra dura,<br>ef þú þat man,<br>at þú þinn mög bæðir<br>til kumbdýsjar kona.                 | Awake, Gróa, awake!<br>Good woman, I wake you at the door of the dead.<br>Do you recall that you asked your son<br>to come to your burial mound?          |
|                                    | 2      | 24-47      | ALTO:    | Hvat er nú ann<br>mínun einkasyni,<br>hverju eru nú bálvi borinn,<br>er þú þá móður kallar,<br>er til moldar er komin<br>ok ör ljósheimum lifin?" | What troubles now my only son,<br>what curse is on you,<br>that you call upon your mother<br>who lies beneath the earth, and has left the world of light? |
|                                    | 3      | 52-64      | Tenor:   | Ljótu leikborði<br>skaut fyr mik in lævíska kona,<br>sú er faðmaði minn föður;<br>þar bað hon mik koma,<br>er kvæmtki veit,<br>móti menglóbóm.    | A wicked trick is played on me<br>by the cunning woman who embraced my father.<br>She told me to go<br>where no-one can go, to Menglóbó the giantess.     |
|                                    | 4      | 65-92      | Alto:    | Löng er fôr,<br>langir eru farvegir,<br>langir eru manna munir,<br>ef þat verð,<br>at þú þinn vílja biðir,<br>ok skeikar þá skuld at sköpum.      | The journey is long,<br>and man's desires are long-lasting,<br>if you gain your wish,<br>then the Fate's plan will be thwarted.                           |

<sup>8</sup> Translation by Anna Yates. Used by permission of the translator.

Table 3. Continued.

|                                   |   |                   |                    |   |  |
|-----------------------------------|---|-------------------|--------------------|---|--|
| "Grógaldr"<br>(The Spell of Gróa) | 5 | 96-102<br>103-117 | Duet:<br>Tenor:    | Galdra þú mér gal,<br>þá er góðir eru,<br>bjarg þú, móðir, meg;<br>á vegum allr<br>hygg ek, at ek verða muna,<br>þykkum ek til ungr afi.                        | Cast me a spell, Mother,<br>to save me.<br>I fear I may expire on the way,<br>and I am too young to die.   |
|                                   | 6 | 118-138           | Duet: <sup>9</sup> | Þann gel ek þér fyrstan,<br>þann er kveða fjölnýtan,<br>þann gól Rindi Rani,<br>at þú of öxl skjótr,<br>þvi er þér analt þykir,<br>sjálfir leið þú sjálfan þik. | I chant you the first spell,<br>a powerful spell as Rind cast for Rán:<br>shake off your shoulders what scares you,<br>and be your own master.     |
|                                   | 7 | 139-163           | Duet:              | Þann gel ek þér annan,<br>ef þú áma skalt<br>viljalauss á vegum,<br>Urðar lokur<br>haldi þér öllum megum,<br>er þú á sinnum sér.                                | I chant you a second spell:<br>When you are discouraged upon the way,<br>speak the magic verses of Urður,<br>to keep you safe on your journey.     |
|                                   | 8 | 164-184           | Duet:              | Þann gel ek þér inn þriðja,<br>ef þér þjóðáar<br>falla at fjörlostum,<br>Horn ok Ruðr<br>snúsk til heljar heðan,<br>ok þverri æ fyrir þér.                      | I chant you a third spell:<br>If huge rivers threaten your life,<br>may the rivers Horn and Ruð descend to Hell,<br>and dry up the way before you. |

<sup>9</sup> Though listed as a duet, both the Alto and Tenor voice have a number of short solo passages throughout the rest of this work. However, these usually consist of only a few lines, sometimes beginning or ending in the middle of a verse. For this reason, the remainder of the work has been labeled as a "Duet." In terms of the narrative; however, these stanzas are clearly those of Gróa and not of her son.

Table 3. Continued.

|                                   |    |         |       |  |  |
|-----------------------------------|----|---------|-------|--|--|
| (The Spell of Gróa)<br>"Grógaldr" | 9  | 186-213 | Duet: | Þann gel ek þér inn fjórða,<br>ef þik fiáðr standa<br>görvir á galgvegi,<br>hugr þeim hverfi<br>til handa þér,<br>ok snúisk þeim til sátta sefi.                                 | I chant you a fourth spell:<br>Should enemies lie in wait to kill you,<br>may they have a change of heart,<br>and make their peace with you.             |
|                                   | 10 | 215-247 | Duet: | Þann gel ek þér inn fimmta,<br>ef þér fóturr verðr<br>borinn at boglimum:<br>leysigaldr læt ek<br>þér fyr legg of kveðinn,<br>ok stökk þá láss af limum,<br>en af fótum fjóturr. | I chant you a fifth spell:<br>Should you be bound hand and foot,<br>I give you a spell to free you,<br>and the locks and fetters will fly off.           |
|                                   | 11 | 253-282 | Duet: | Þann gel ek þér inn sétta,<br>ef þú á sjó kemr<br>meira en menn víti,<br>logn ok loðr<br>gangi þér í liðr saman<br>ok léi þér æ friðrjúgrar farrar.                              | I chant you a sixth spell:<br>If you are on stormy seas,<br>may the waves be calmed,<br>so that you shall have a peaceful journey.                       |
|                                   | 12 | 284-310 | Duet: | Þann gel ek þér inn sjáunda,<br>ef þik sækja kemr<br>frost á fjalli háu,<br>hræva kuldi<br>megit þínu holdi fara,<br>ok haldisk æ lík at liðum.                                  | I chant you a seventh spell:<br>If you are caught in frosty weather on a high mountain,<br>may the cold not chill your flesh,<br>nor stiffen your limbs. |
|                                   | 13 | 315-333 | Duet: | Þann gel ek þér inn átta,<br>ef þik úti nemr<br>nótt á niflvegi,<br>at því fyr megi<br>þér til meins gera<br>kristin dauð kona.  | I chant you an eighth spell:<br>If you should be lost at night on a foggy path,<br>may you be safe from being harmed<br>by a dead Christian woman.       |

Table 3. Continued.

|  |         |       |   |   |
|--|---------|-------|---|---|
| <p>14</p> <p>(The Spell of Gróa)</p> <p>"Grógaldr"</p> | 337-359 | Duet: | Þann gæl ek þér inn niúnda,<br>ef þú við inn naddgönga<br>orðum skipitr jötun,<br>máls ok mannvits<br>sé þér á minni ok hjarta<br>gróga of gefit. | I chant you a ninth spell:<br>Should you find yourself in a war of words<br>with the armed giant,<br>may your heart and mind be full of wit.          |
|  | 361-405 | Duet: | Far þú nú æva,<br>þar er forað þykkir,<br>ok stándit þér mein fyr munum;<br>á jarðstum steini<br>stóð ek innan dura,<br>meðan ek þér galdra gól.  | Go now to the dangerous places,<br>and may you not come to harm.<br>I stood upon a rock within doors<br>as I chanted spells for you.                  |
|  | 406-473 | Duet: | Móður orð<br>ber þú, mögr, heðan<br>ok lát þér í brjósti búa;<br>iðgnóga heill<br>skaltu of aldr hafa,<br>meðan þú mín orð of mant.               | Take your mother's words away with you, my son,<br>and keep them in your heart.<br>You will have good fortune forever<br>while you remember my words. |

however, are far less abrupt than in either of the earlier cantatas, with one mood flowing rather effortlessly into the next.

As has been stated, Leifs *Grógaldr* is one of his more mature and challenging works. This is especially true for the vocalists, for whom there are numerous melismatic passages containing multiple disjunct leaps, as well as rapidly changing dynamics. Further, there is little time for either soloist to rest at any point during the cantata. This is especially true from measure 118 to the end of the work. Although these eleven stanzas of text belong to Gróa as far as their thematic purpose is concerned, Leifs chose to set this long series of incantations, as well as Gróa's final words of advice to Svipdag, as a duet between the alto and tenor. While the alto voice is clearly dominant in these 356 measures, the tenor voice plays an important role in emphasizing specific words and concepts, as well as providing the parallel fifths of *tvísöngur*. The following passage (measures 229 to 235) illustrates the type of vocal melismas and their instrumental unisons, as well as *tvísöngur* harmonies, found throughout *Grógaldr*.

The image shows a page from a musical score, labeled 168. It contains 18 staves of music. The staves are labeled on the left as follows: Fl., R., Cl., Fg., Orl., Tr., Tbn., Timp., Cmb., Atr., Tba., Vc., Vln., Vla., Vlo., and Kb. The music is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The tempo is marked 'Andante'. The score begins with a series of unison pizzicato eighth notes in the cello and contrabassoon. The mood is described as ominous, with a powerful command from the tenor voice appearing on the downbeat of the fourth measure.

Labeled *Andante*, *Grógaldur* opens very similarly to *Guðrúnarkviða*, in triple time with unison *pizzicato* eighth notes in the cello and contrabassoon. The mood, however, is quite different. Whereas the earlier cantata opens *pianissimo* with a sense of reverence and sorrow, the *forte* opening of *Grógaldur*, followed by the abrupt entrance of the timpani on the second beat of the third measure, is rather ominous. Though subdued somewhat at times, this continues to be the basic mood of the cantata. The tenor voice, representing Svipdag, appears above this menacing foundation on the downbeat of the fourth measure with the powerful command “Vaki þú, Gróa, vaki þú, góð kona” (Awake, Gróa, awake!

Good woman)—the first word, “Vaki” (Awake), stretching over two measures as it crescendos from *mezzo piano* to *forte* before returning to *piano* on the word “þú” (you).

As the opening stanza continues, the second of the cantata’s two motifs—an accented eighth note followed by an eighth rest on each beat of the measure, usually followed by a longer note value at the beginning of the subsequent measure—is revealed. This occurs for the first time in measure 12, the same point at which the wind instruments make their first entrance, and is played in unison by the horns, trumpets, and timpani. Presumably meant to depict magical chant, as the purpose of the opening stanza is to call the deceased Gróa from the grave, this pattern often, though not always, involves a single pitch per measure when it appears, as in the following example (measures 15 to 19).

The first stanza ends with the tenor holding the second syllable of the word “koma” (come) on a low B-flat in quadruple time from measure 21 to the first beat of 25. The second stanza, delivered by the alto, begins in measure 24 with the word “Hvat” (what) being held for nine counts on a low F, overlapping the tenor voice at the fifth for five

beats. Both voices, as well as the wind parts, are labeled *morendo* during this period of five beats. The remainder of the stanza is an alto solo, except for measures 38 to 41 in which Gróa is joined by her son at various intervals on the words “móður kallar” (call upon your mother). The stanza ends in measure 47, with the next several *pianissimo* measures of *sul ponticello* in the strings possibly depicting Gróa’s final transcendence into the realm of the living.

The third stanza, delivered by the tenor, is slightly more active and contains both the descending and chant motifs. Leifs uses word-painting in the subsequent stanza, measures 65 to 92, as Gróa stretches the verse “Löng er fôr, langir eru farvegir” (The journey is long) over forty beats in the first ten measures, accompanied by equally drawn out musical figures in the strings and low woodwinds. Svipdag’s proposed quest is given added dread by numerous timpani rolls and the bass drum, both of which are performed with *piano*-range dynamics. The following example (measures 65 to 71) displays just the first seven measures of this stanza.

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system contains staves for Soprano (S. Cl.), Alto (Alto), and Timpani (Timp.). The second system contains staves for Flute (Fl.), Viola (Via.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). A section marker [C] is placed above the first staff of the first system. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *ppp*, *pp*, *mp*, *f*, *sfz*, and *sf*. Performance instructions in Italian, such as "un poco cresc.", "un poco decresc.", and "un poco cresc.", are written below the staves. The lyrics "Löng er fôr, langir eru farvegir" are written below the Alto staff, with the words "Löng", "er", "fôr", "lang", "ir", "er", "u", "ar", "u", "g" aligned with the notes. The score ends with a final measure in the second system.

At the conclusion of the fourth stanza, a full measure of rest—elongated by a fermata—in both voices and all instruments except the tam-tam, which has a *pianissimo* whole note, serves as a dramatic pause that perhaps symbolizes second-thoughts on the part of Svipdag concerning his quest. Svipdag having obviously decided to proceed, the fifth stanza, measures 96 to 117, opens with the tenor singing “Galdra þú mér gal, þá er góðir eru” (Cast me a spell, Mother, to save me) as Svipdag requests magical protection from his mother. The alto soon enters for a brief duet, measures 99 to 102, with the words “Galdra, . . . þá er góðir eru” (Cast, . . . to save me), leaving the remainder of the stanza to the tenor.

Each of the next nine stanzas, measures 118 to 359, is one of the nine protective spells that Gróa casts for her son. This large section of 241 measures is not set off in any way from the previous material, the alto delivering the first of Gróa’s spells immediately after the tenor’s completion of the fifth stanza. For the most part, there are no major differences in the musical settings of *individual* stanzas, though there is a noticeable change of emotion about halfway through this section. The first five stanzas, six to ten, are set as one of the cantata’s most menacing passages, due largely to the intensification of timpani and bass drum parts. Following the tenth stanza, the score is labeled *tranquillo* as a brief six-measure *tremolo* string passage of *sul ponticello* and *senza ponticello* leads into the final four stanzas. Over the course of these four spells’ settings, during which there is much less timpani and bass drum activity, Leifs’s tempo/expression indications range from *tranquillo* to *sempre tranquillo* to *molto tranquillo*.

The following material provides a few details on the musical setting of these nine spells—each of which begins with the phrase “Þann gel ek þér” (I chant you a)—as well as the words or phrases that are sung as duets.<sup>10</sup>

1. The spell of protection against fear (stanza six/measures 118 to 138) is cast quickly and includes the use of both the descending and chant motif. The word “gól,” which may be literally translated as “howl” or “yelp,” is set to a triplet figure, in eighth notes, leading into a quarter tied to an eighth note that, beginning on the upper pitch, alternates between D-sharp<sup>5</sup> and D-sharp<sup>4</sup>. Duets occur on the words “fyrstan, þann er kveða fjölnýtan,” “Rani,” and “sjálf leið þú sjálfan þik.”
2. The spell of protection against discouragement (stanza seven/measures 139 to 163), labeled *sempre tranquillo*, contains an excellent example of word-painting. In measure 147 the dynamic level drops from *mezzo piano* to *pianissimo* as the phrase “viljalauss á vegum” (discouraged upon the way) musically descends over the course of almost eight measures. After nearly a measure of rest, the timpani ushers in the remainder of the stanza as the music returns to the previous ominous mood. Duets occur on the words “Urðar lokur” and “öllum megum.”
3. The spell of protection against drowning (stanza eight/measures 164 to 184) is built largely of the descending motif and has a number of timpani rolls. A duet occurs on the words “fjörlotum, Horn ok Ruðr.”
4. The spell of protection against enemies (stanza nine/measures 186 to 213) begins in the same vein as the third spell as Gróa speaks of the possibility of Svipdag encountering dangerous men. The stanza’s second half (measures 199 to 213), which deals with the men’s change of attitude towards Svipdag, is given a far more subdued setting, however, being almost devoid of percussion. Duets occur on the words “inn fjórða,” “hugr þeim hverfi,” and “þeim til sátta sefi.”
5. The spell of protection against captivity (stanza ten/measures 215 to 247) begins after a full measure of rests, elongated by fermatas, in all instruments but the timpani, that follows the fourth stanza. The fifth is the most violent and percussive of the nine spells, containing a number of accented rhythmic figures. This stanza also contains some of the most elaborate vocal melismas in the cantata. In addition to the aforementioned duet in measures 229 to 235, the stanza’s opening two words in the alto voice—“Þann gel” (I chant)—are each treated melodically, the later in eighth notes on the pitches F<sup>5</sup>, E-flat<sup>4</sup>, B-flat<sup>4</sup>, E<sup>5</sup>, F<sup>4</sup>, B-flat<sup>4</sup>, and B<sup>3</sup>. Duets occur on the words “fimmta,” “leysigaldur læt,” “legg,” “láss af limnum,” and “fötum fjörurr.”

<sup>10</sup> Gróa’s spell names are rough equivalents of the actual spells found in the poetry.

6. The spell of protection against stormy seas (stanza eleven/measures 253 to 282) follows the aforementioned six-measure *tremolo* string passage of *sul ponticello* and *senza ponticello*, labeled *tranquillo*, which not establishes a more relaxed mood, but may also be meant to depict the calming of stormy seas. The vocal lines in this stanza are labeled by a fair degree of lyricism, with both melodic motifs coming into play. Duets occur on the words “inn séttá . . . á” and “í . . . ok . . . æ.”
7. The spell of protection against frost (stanza twelve/measures 284 to 310), labeled *molto tranquillo*, opens with an accompaniment pitched in the upper extremes of the violin (E<sup>6</sup>), viola (E<sup>6</sup>), and cello (E<sup>5</sup>)—possibly meant to depict the icy climate of a mountain top—that slowly descends over the course of nine measures. The vocal line, which is almost exclusively an alto solo, relies heavily on the descending motif. A duet occurs on the words “ok . . . æ.”
8. The spell of protection against evil spirits (stanza thirteen/measures 315 to 333) is preceded by a reiteration of the descending motif in the contrabassoon and contrabass parts in measures 313 to 314. This motif is not particularly prevalent in the stanza’s vocal material, however, which is instead marked by numerous ascending and descending intervallic leaps, including several that span nearly an entire octave. Duets occur on the words “inn áttá, ef” and “kristin.”
9. The spell of protection against loss of words (stanza fourteen/measures 337 to 359) is separated from the previous stanza by three measures of near silence, with just three eighth notes appearing in the contrabass part and one in the timpani. Over the course of the stanza’s twenty-two measures, the music moves from the *molto tranquillo* mood of the previous stanzas to the ominous and highly percussive nature of the cantata as a whole. A long melismatic duet occurs on the word “jötun.”

Following the end of the nine spells on the downbeat of measure 359, a horn call beginning at the end of the measure, echoed immediately by calls from the trumpet and trombone, signals the final two stanzas of *Grógaldur*. Labeled *maestoso*, stanza fifteen is perhaps the most powerfully set material in the work. Accompanied by the full orchestra, as well as numerous percussion instruments, the vocal melody contains both the descending and chant motif, as well as several lengthy and highly disjunct melismas. In addition, the alto and tenor are each called upon several times to sustain pitches at the top of their respective range, beginning with the alto’s delivery of the word “Far” (Go) on a *ff* C<sup>5</sup> for four measures and “æva” (dangerous places) on a *sf* G<sup>5</sup>, crescendoing to *f*, for

three measures. The most significant duet passage occurs in measures 395 to 405 on the words “galdr gól” (chanted spells).

The final stanza, in which Gróa urges Svipdag to heed her words in order to prolong his life and survive his quest for Mengloth, is once again more subdued. Three tempo markings appear in the score, beginning with *tranquillo* in measure 429 followed closely by *animato e maestoso* in measure 437. In duple time, the accompaniment consists largely of tied half notes for the majority of the stanza’s sixty-seven measures. The vocal parts are slightly more active, though consisting primarily of slow-moving melismas rather than either of the two melodic motifs. Nevertheless, both the timpani and bass drum parts are quite rhythmic and powerful, propelling the stanza, and indeed the cantata, to its ultimate conclusion. Labeled *allargando*, the closing four bars of *Grógaldr* feature a final return to the score’s overall ominous nature for the words “orð of mant” (remember my words).

## CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

Over the course of the past two hundred years, Nordic art music composers have looked towards the myths and legends of their respective countries, as well as those of the Nordic region as a whole, for musical inspiration. As a result, a large number of compositions have been written—including orchestral scores, operas, and vocal works—that are directly connected to such important pieces of Medieval literature as the *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Kalevala*, the Icelandic sagas, *Heimskringla*, and *Gesta Danorum*. Nevertheless, far more people have probably read these pieces of literature than have heard, or even heard of, a large portion of the musical scores discussed in this dissertation, despite the fact that nearly all of them have been performed and recorded at least once.

While such works as Edvard Grieg's *Landkjenning*, op. 31, Carl Nielsen's *Saga-drøm*, op. 39, and Jean's Sibelius's *Lemminkäis-sarja*, op. 22, are part of the standard modern repertoire both in the Nordic countries and abroad, only a small portion of the many works based on Nordic epics and sagas by other, lesser-known, Nordic composers receive even occasional performances. Those that do are usually performed only in the country of their origin, and then very infrequently. Such composers as Johan Peter Emilius Hartmann, Niels Wilhelm Gade, Kurt Magnus Atterberg, Wilhelm Peterson-Berger, Uuno Klami, and Einojuhani Rautavaara are frequently unknown to even the

most faithful American concertgoer, despite the fact that their names do occasionally appear on concert programs. Other composers, including David Monrad Johansen, Geirr Tveitt, Aarre Merikanto, Erkki Melartin, and Jón Leifs, rarely get performances outside of their own countries.

Nevertheless, the many contributions made to the history of Nordic art music by these and other composers discussed in this dissertation are immense. Particularly important are their compositions based directly on the Nordic epics and sagas. Not only have such works added to the vast Nordic art music repertoire, but they continue to aid in the preservation of the rich Medieval literary heritage of the Nordic nations. A number of orchestral scores by Jón Leifs, including those discussed in Chapters Six and Seven—*Sögusinfónían*, *Guðrúnarkviða*, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, and *Grógaldr*—are prime examples of Icelandic art music compositions that owe much to their literary models, in this case the Icelandic sagas and *Poetic Edda* respectively.

In addition, these four works excellently illustrate the uniqueness of Leifs's entire oeuvre—due largely to its creation via a musical idiom decidedly different from that of any of Leifs's major contemporaries—despite the composer's Germanic musical training in Leipzig. Further, Leifs's music and compositional style are wholly unique within the entire context of modern Nordic art music. While numerous twentieth-century composers from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland embraced various *avant-garde* techniques—including serialism, expressionism, aleatory, and electro-acoustic—none approached Iceland's premiere composer in terms of sheer originality. Leifs's musical language, in which elements of Icelandic folk music are combined with

those of his own design, is wholly innovative and, at this time, nearly impossible to accurately categorize, though it may perhaps be considered a type of expressionism.

In addition to *Sögusinfónían*, *Guðrúnarkviða*, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, and *Grógaldur*, Leifs composed several other scores based on Nordic myths and legends that, at the time of this writing, are just beginning to garner notable attention. The composer's "Choreographic Drama without Words"—*Baldr*, op. 34 (1943-47)—for instance, received its premiere performance in Reykjavík on August 18, 2000, and was considered "a major national event, hyped for days before and debated for days afterwards in the national press, attended by the President, and cheered in standing ovations by an audience of at least 5000."<sup>1</sup> Though it had been recorded in 1991 by the Icelandic Youth Orchestra, this more recent performance was the first to include the full staging intended by Leifs. *Baldr* was subsequently premiered with equal success in Bergen and Helsinki.<sup>2</sup>

The composer's three *Edda*-oratorios, meanwhile, have yet to be fully staged, much less recorded, though portions of *Edda I* "*Sköpun heimsins*," op. 20 (The Creation of the World; 1935-39) have been performed. *Edda II* "*Líf guðanna*," op. 42 (The Lives of the Gods; 1966) and the incomplete *Edda III* "*Ragnarök*," op. 65 (The Twilight of the Gods; 1968), meanwhile, may have to wait for quite a while before being tackled by the *Sinfóníuhljómsveit Íslands* (Iceland Symphony Orchestra). Not only is the funding necessary for so massive an undertaking prohibitive, but, as John Pickard asserts, the music itself poses numerous challenges. To begin, Leifs's three oratorios call for a larger choral force than could easily be assembled in Iceland. Vocal stamina is also a problem

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<sup>1</sup> Hilary Finch, "Baldur's Time Has Come," *Nordic Sounds* (3/2000) 21.

<sup>2</sup> Finch, 21-23.

as the choir is required to sing for almost the entirety of each oratorio. Finally, the rhythmic importance of Icelandic to the music, combined with the language's difficulty, virtually eliminates the possibility of performance by a non-native choir.<sup>3</sup>

These few Leifs scores aside, however, nearly every work mentioned in this dissertation has been performed and recorded at least once and is currently available on compact disc, though usually on a Nordic label not always readily available outside of Europe. The bulk of compositions by Grieg, Sibelius, and Nielsen, meanwhile, are readily available on both American and European labels. Almost all of Jón Leifs's major works, on the other hand, have been recorded on the Swedish BIS label, with more, possibly including *Edda I*, planned for the near future. The majority of these works' scores, however, are often somewhat more difficult to obtain, available only from their respective country's music information center. Further, several of the works discussed in this study exist only in manuscript form.

Unfortunately, most of the scores of Jón Leifs's compositions are not easily obtainable outside of Iceland, undoubtedly accounting for the severe lack of performances of his music outside of the Nordic region. For instance, the scores required to complete this dissertation—those for *Sögusinfónían*, *Guðrúnarkviða*, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana*, and *Grógaldur*—were purchased by the author himself directly from the Íslensk Tónverkamiðstöð (Icelandic Music Information Centre) as they were not available from an American library at the time of this writing. Fortunately, however, the Íslensk Tónverkamiðstöð has published and distributes the bulk of Leifs's major scores and is eager to see his works disseminated, studied, and performed abroad.

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<sup>3</sup> John Pickard, "Jón Leifs (1899-1968)," *Tempo* 208 (1999): 15.

In conclusion, the many Nordic art music compositions based on Nordic epics and sagas that have been written over the past two centuries hold an important position in the history of Western art music. Though most are not as well known as similar works by such Continental composers as Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, and Richard Strauss, they nonetheless warrant the attention of both audiences and academics. This is particularly true of the works of Jón Leifs, which may legitimately be placed alongside those of such figures as Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), Charles Ives (1874-1954), Béla Bartók (1881-1945), and John Cage (1912-92) in terms of originality. Further, in time, Leifs's name may be recognized alongside those of Edvard Grieg, Carl Nielsen, Jean Sibelius, and perhaps Hugo Alfvén, as the Icelandic representative in the pantheon of truly *great* Nordic composers.

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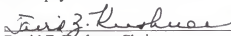
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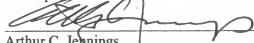
## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Frederick Key Smith (b. 1971) holds a B.A. in English from Florida Southern College, a M.M. in music history from the University of Florida, and a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Florida, having held an Alumni Graduate Fellowship over the course of his doctoral work at the former. He has presented a number of papers on Nordic art music at various conferences, including the Third International Jean Sibelius Conference in Helsinki, Finland (December 2000). Smith is the author of the book *Nordic Art Music: From the Middle Ages to the Third Millennium* (2002) and currently teaches at the University of Florida as an Adjunct Lecturer.

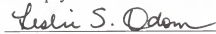
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This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the College of Fine Arts and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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